essay

Mountain resort communities are experiencing increasing growth both as vacation destinations and as relocation sites for retirees and for professionals who work at home. This recent influx, which has heightened competition for land and housing and contributed to traffic congestion, threatens to encroach on the open space that has always made these communities so desirable.

At mountain resort communities, tourists, vacation home owners, residents, and service-sector employees all compete for available land and housing. Vacation homes account for nearly 80 percent of all vacancies in Aspen and over 70 percent of those in Sun Valley. Not only do vacation homes consume valuable land and require community-provided infrastructure, they remain vacant most of the year. On the other hand, the property taxes on these properties help fund public facilities such as schools, post offices, and fire stations, which are seldom used by part-time residents.

In areas where developable land is scarce, the law of supply and demand drives both property values and property taxes higher, thereby limiting the housing options for those with lower incomes. For example, the median home price in Taos County, New Mexico, excluding Taos Ski Valley, was roughly $190,000 in 1997, while the median household income was about $18,000. Single-family homes in the city of Aspen and Pitkin County sold for an average of nearly $2 million and $600,000, respectively, in 1997 despite a countywide median household income of approximately $48,000. The "affordability gap"—the difference between mean household income and average home value in a community—determines the availability of affordable housing. The larger the difference between the two, the more difficult it is for lower-income individuals to find housing. This lack of affordable housing threatens the viability of resort communities, since employees of local businesses cannot afford to live where they work. This, in turn, forces employers to offer higher wages in order to attract workers from distant towns. As the working population is forced to find housing in outlying towns, their daily commutes to and from work exacerbate the existing traffic problems caused by visitors driving cars.

A proactive approach is needed to ensure the creation of affordable housing in mountain resort communities. In Aspen, all development proposals must include an affordable housing component in order to gain approval. As a result,

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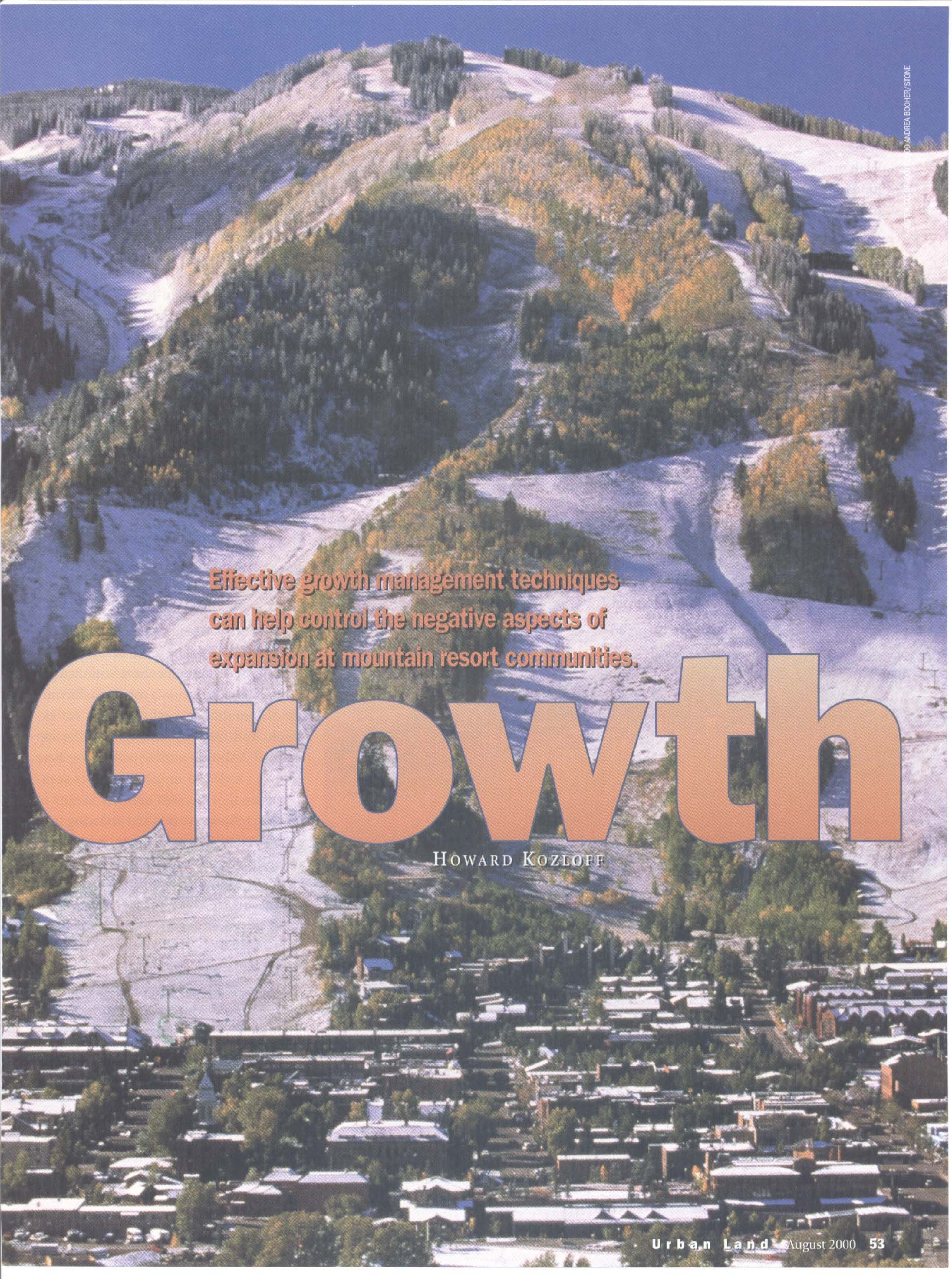
Aspen has more than 1,000 units of affordable housing. The Park City area has many affordable housing options, due to availability of low-cost housing in neighboring Wasatch County and in Salt Lake City. In Park City itself, a developer's contribution to affordable housing is determined by negotiation. Although the goal is to set aside 10 percent of a project's total units as affordable housing, negotiations often are time consuming, unpredictable, and therefore expensive for developers and for the local government. Guidelines for inclusion of affordable housing should provide flexible approaches to satisfying permitting requirements and should encourage developers to propose innovative strategies to help solve the affordable housing problem.

While the Park City Mountain Resort does not own employee housing units, it does lease market-rate units on an annual basis and rents them to employees at a reduced rate. The Aspen Skiing Company, on the other hand, has constructed nearly 250 employee housing units. Further funds to be used for affordable housing could be raised, for example, through a self-imposed tax on lift-ticket sales. Even a $1 tax on lift tickets could provide almost $500,000 per year at many resorts, which over time could go to funding the construction and maintenance of affordable housing units.

In Aspen, an accessory dwelling unit ordinance is in place that requires developers of new large-scale single-family homes to construct apartments with the homes that can be made available as rental units or as affordable housing. However, many of these units are left vacant since owners choose not to rent them and enforcement of the ordinance by the county is almost nonexistent.

As with other issues, cooperation between counties and their respective towns is important in ensuring the creation of affordable housing. Approaches such as tax-base sharing reduce the competition for tax dollars. Additional tools, such as linkage payments, real estate transfer taxes, and speculation taxes also can create funds for affordable housing.



ANDREA BOOHER/STONE

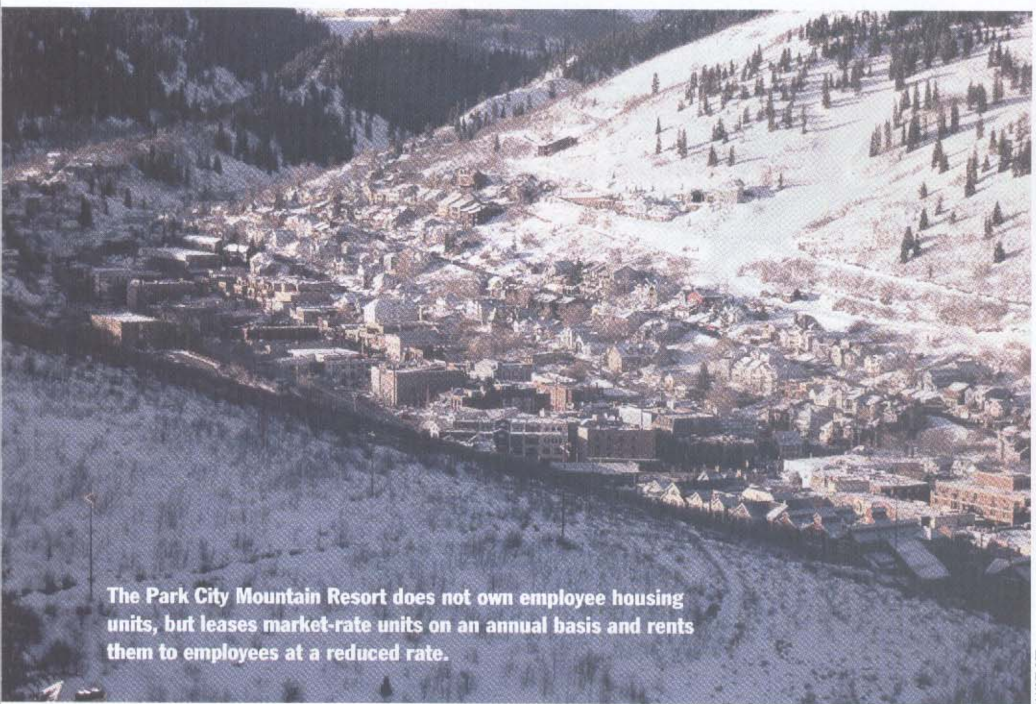
Effective growth management techniques can help control the negative aspects of expansion at mountain resort communities.

Growth

HOWARD KOZLOFF

With predictable and streamlined approval processes in place, the funds, incentives, and tools needed to facilitate successful development of affordable housing can be made available.

Cars also pose a threat to the preservation of mountain resort communities since residents and visitors generate a significant amount of traffic in the core areas. The city of Aspen has a population of roughly 6,000 people, which doubles on an average winter day and triples during the peak summer season. Most of the service-sector employees, who are forced to live outside of core areas, drive more than 20 minutes to get to work. In Aspen, as well as in Park City and Sun Valley, roughly 70 percent of all commuters drive alone. Standard methods of reducing traffic, such as public transit, carpooling, or high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, could help to reduce commuting time, pedestrian-vehicle conflicts, traffic congestion, and the resulting air pollution. Partnerships between cities and mountain resorts could provide a transit pass with the purchase of a lift ticket or a hotel room. High use of public transit by locals, along with effective marketing, could be used to inform visitors of the ease and benefits of transit use and could significantly reduce reliance on cars.



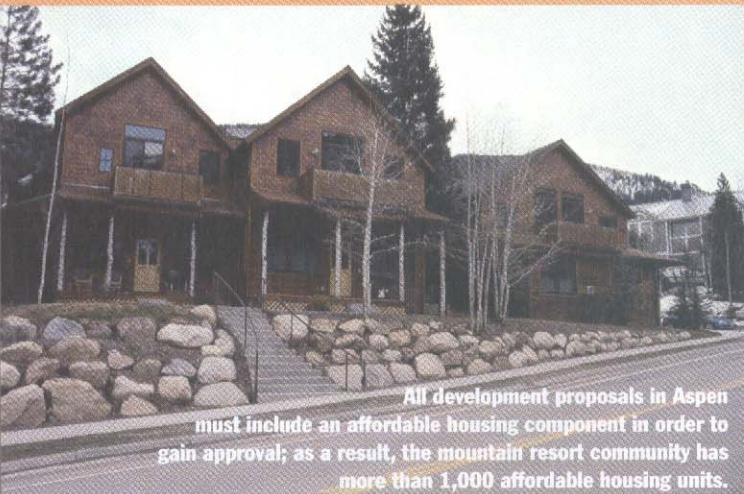
The Park City Mountain Resort does not own employee housing units, but leases market-rate units on an annual basis and rents them to employees at a reduced rate.

H KOZLOFF

Public transit has been successfully integrated into some mountain resort communities. The Roaring Fork Transit Agency (RFTA) in Aspen has an annual ridership of about 3.7 million, one of the highest per-capita rates in the country. Financial commitments and ongoing cooperation from various municipalities, the federal government, and the Aspen Skiing Company have contributed to its success. Although Park City's private transit system is effective in supporting most of the town, a combined effort on the part of Park City, Summit County, and the Utah Transit Agency (UTA) could create a more extensive public transit system. With the impending 2002 Winter Olympic Games, a new regional transit system could be showcased for both visitors and residents. A successful approach to limiting the reliance on cars is the town lift in Park City, a chairlift that connects the ski mountain to 1,000 in-town beds. Because of the lift, the ease of access from the airport, and a free bus system in town, 40 percent of visitors choose not to use vehicles. The Sun Valley area, however, has yet to capitalize on an opportunity for mass transit. In the mid-1980s, the Idaho Department of Transportation purchased the former Union Pacific Railroad right-of-way and made it available to Blaine County. Nearly 20 years later, the county has yet to establish a transportation plan for the corridor despite traffic counts on the main highway that are two to three times the safe carrying capacity. The area does not have a valley-wide transportation system, even though almost 1,000 people commute daily from out of the county and over 5,000 people drive alone. With planning, the right-of-way could easily be transformed into a dedicated busway in a relatively short time.

Once cars have entered the mountain resort community, they must have a place to park. Many communities have instituted pay parking in their core as a means to discourage automobile use; when Aspen, for example, instituted pay parking, bus ridership doubled. Although satellite parking lots have yet to be tested in mountain resort communities, they present another means of limiting reliance on cars and reducing traffic; they also can contribute to creating development opportunities. For example, the Park City Mountain Resort has a large unsightly surface lot at its base, a space that could be used to develop resort amenities and affordable housing should satellite parking eliminate the need for the lot.

Preserving a mountain resort community's image depends on the area's ability to retain open space. More and more, roof lines replace ridge lines, suburban subdivisions frame shortened vistas, and agricultural fields become gated communities. To destroy or minimize open space is to distort the most recognizable feature of mountain resort communities. In Park City, for example, 90 percent of land within municipal boundaries was undeveloped in 1980; by 1995, only 37 percent of land was undeveloped. Aware of the importance of open space, local governments in mountain resort communities are involved in intergovernmental agreements to deal with



All development proposals in Aspen must include an affordable housing component in order to gain approval; as a result, the mountain resort community has more than 1,000 affordable housing units.

H KOZLOFF

this issue, which is best addressed by ensuring the future existence of large stretches of undeveloped land. Development pressures will only increase over time, and the ability of local governments to stand behind their policies can be the difference between a compact urban core and undesirable sprawl. Large landowners, including resorts, whose actions can single-handedly change the dynamics of a town, are instrumental in deciding the future of mountain resort communities.

Development that is concerned with the overall character of a community, such as cluster development, will both create value and save land. Large-lot zoning, typical of many mountain areas, suggests protection of the environment via lower density, but typically does just the opposite. For example, 100 two-acre lots on a 200-acre site will eradicate all open space and natural features. On the other hand, 100 one-acre lots on a portion of the site will preserve half of the site as open space while requiring fewer roads and less infrastructure. Open space adjacent to development will increase property values for the developer and reduce infrastructure costs. Clustered development also can create a transit node that can help reduce automobile congestion in the core.

Public transit has been successfully integrated into some mountain resort communities, such as Aspen, where some 3.7 million ride the buses annually.

H KOZLOFF

The role of the mountain resort in providing open space is often overlooked. In Summit County, for example, Park City Mountain Resort, Deer Valley Resort, and the Canyons have over 15,000 acres of skiable terrain. This equates to roughly one acre of open space per person provided solely by the resorts. Some argue that such statistics are misleading because residents must share this land with tourists and because the resorts charge user fees. However, resorts usually charge users only during the ski season, which is approximately five months long. For the remaining seven months, access is free. The resort corporations invest massive amounts of capital to create, maintain, and operate the facilities. The user fees can be viewed in the same light as entrance fees at a national park. In fact, Aspen's resorts and the Taos Ski Valley are situated within a national forest, providing accessibility and amenities to a broad spectrum of the population. Although the resort's motivation may be profit, both residents and the resort share the same goal—maintaining the mountains for recreational use.

Various options are available to preserve open space in a mountain resort community, among them buying land to designate as open space, devaluing private land by designating it as undevelopable, and annexing unincorporated land as open space. Both Aspen and Park City have urban growth boundaries (UGBs), which clearly define the physical parameters within which development can take place and preserve outlying open space. Critics contend that because UGBs limit the supply of available land, they raise property values. However, UGBs encourage infill development at higher densities and require more creative solutions for development. In Aspen, development is contingent upon contribution to an open space fund, which is used to purchase open space along the growth boundary. Also, Aspen's real estate transfer tax creates additional funds for both affordable housing and purchase of open space.

Open-space preservation is more challenging in Park City, as the three major resorts are almost completely privately held. Nonetheless, Park City continues to expand its greenbelt. In 1998, Park City used $5 million in city funds and a $10 million bond issue to buy a historic farm property on the edge of the UGB that will remain undeveloped. In addition, the Park City Mining Company developed 7,000 acres of land adjacent to Park City. Through annexation, 85 percent of the land will remain as open space. Because the landowner benefits from annexation, the town is in a strategic position to make such demands.

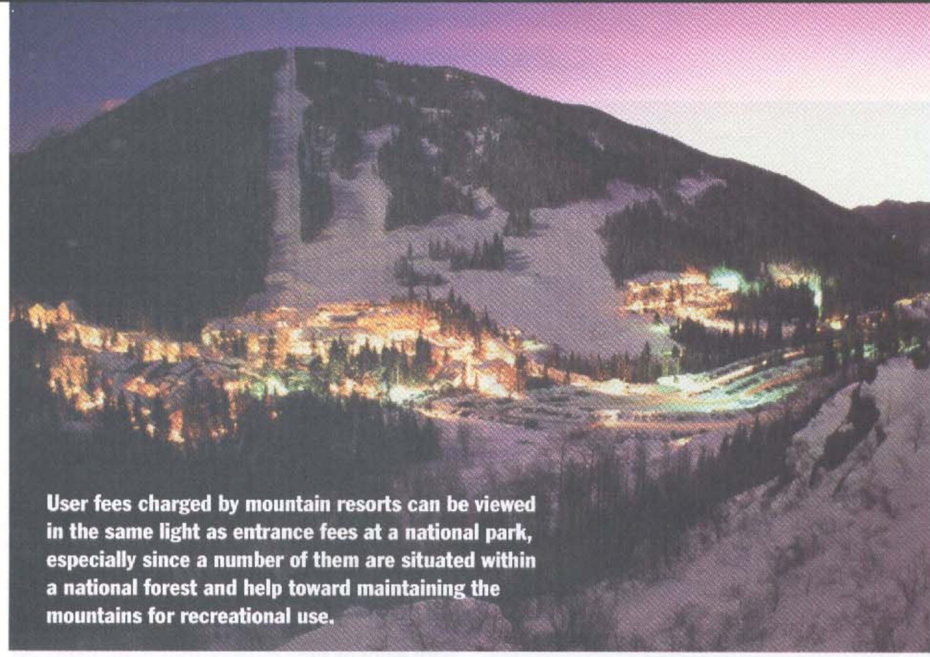
In Sun Valley, rugged topography, steep slopes, and narrow valleys make development difficult, thereby contributing to open-space preservation. Publicly owned lands act as boundaries to growth up the hillsides. In addition, a stringent hillside ordinance prohibiting development on mountain slopes preserves ridge lines and vistas. Entryways and gateways thus are kept clear of visual clutter, including signs and billboards, providing a preview of what the area

See **CONTROLLING GROWTH,** *page 122*

CONTROLLING GROWTH, *from page 55*

has to offer. In Taos, the open space has long been in the form of ranches. Open space elements of the Taos plan are combined with cultural preservation and include aid to farmers to help ensure the long-term presence of the ranches. Town and county cooperation also has led to the creation of a greenbelt.

Conservation easements, whereby landowners exchange decreased development rights for decreased property taxes, are effective in preventing development. Transfer of development rights to already urbanized areas decreases development on the fringes and in the countryside. Cluster development preserves open space when development does occur. All of these methods can be used together to preserve open space.

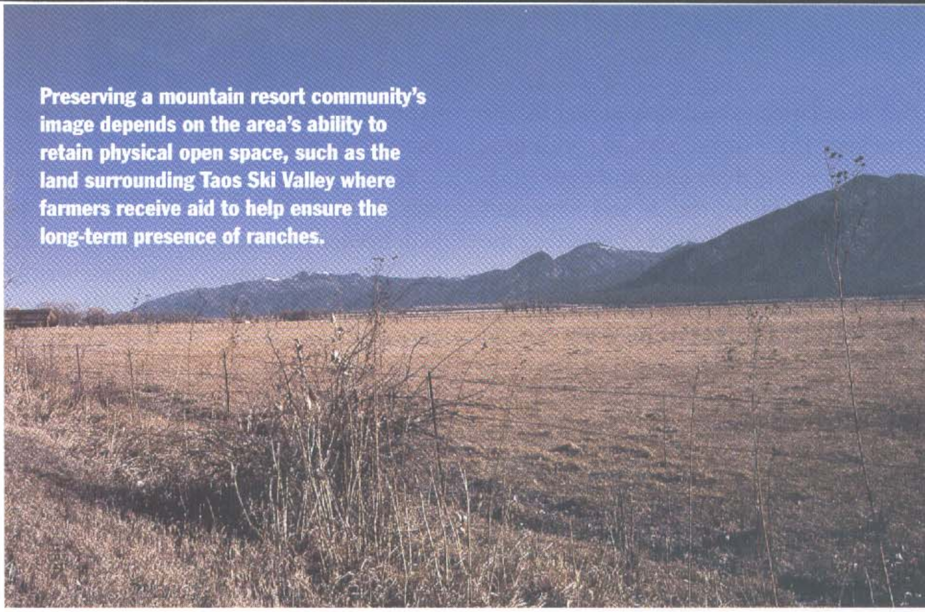


User fees charged by mountain resorts can be viewed in the same light as entrance fees at a national park, especially since a number of them are situated within a national forest and help toward maintaining the mountains for recreational use.

TAOS, NEW MEXICO/©2000 MARC MUENCH/STONE

Open-space preservation requires cooperation among local governments, which need to understand that long-term economic viability depends on preserving the image of resort communities. If the image is sustained, local governments will see increases in their economy far beyond those obtained by approving subdivisions in an open field. The mountain resorts should be considered an ally in this respect. Urban parks in American cities are touted for providing open space in spite of tremendous development pressures. Mountain resorts provide much more open space under even more development pressure.

Mountain resort communities have long provided refuge from the urbanized world, and the fight to prevent change that threatens their way of life is fierce. Instead of fighting, residents need to realize that the greatest threat to mountain resort communities is not affordable housing or public buses, but "urban denial"—the refusal of "small towns" to accept the fact that they have problems typically associated with urban settings, i.e., traffic



Preserving a mountain resort community's image depends on the area's ability to retain physical open space, such as the land surrounding Taos Ski Valley where farmers receive aid to help ensure the long-term presence of ranches.

H KOZLOFF

congestion, need for public transit, poor housing options, and so forth.

Local governments need to make the most important priority the easiest to achieve. For example, suburban subdivisions often are the easiest proposals to get through the permitting process, in spite of the fact that they usually do not meet stated goals. Mixed-use, clustered development that provides a range of housing types, preserves open space, and creates a transit node should be the approach of choice, and thus should win easy approval. Such developments provide the most benefit relative to cost. Local governments need to simplify and streamline codes to make them less complex. Ease of processing permit applications decreases developers' time and money outlays and makes affordable housing requirements all the easier to accept.

In addition, an ongoing exchange of ideas and experiences should be encouraged. Mountain resort communities need to become allies, sharing both successful strategies and failed attempts. Growth management practices must be constantly reviewed and refined, and all involved parties should be encouraged and willing to operate as a partnership. The mountain resort community is a complex organism requiring the efforts of many different entities to keep it operational and to ensure the sustainability of its image, economy, and social structure. Effective growth management techniques that take the interrelationship of housing, transportation, and open space into account can control the deleterious aspects of growth. If both conservation goals and development goals are supported, the change associated with growth can enhance the lifestyle that mountain resort communities represent. ■

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Mountain Resort Vistas

Golf Rounds

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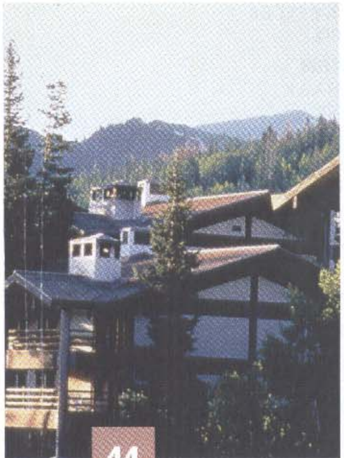
Contents

Urban Land

AUGUST 2000 ■ VOLUME 59 ■ NUMBER 8

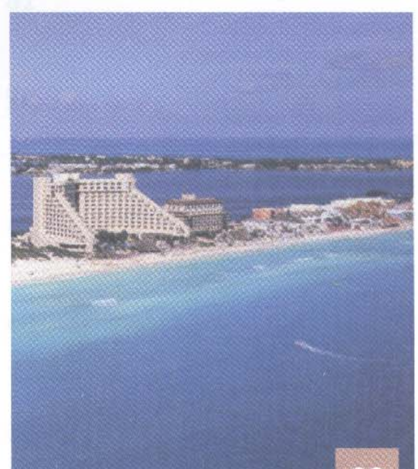


44 Year-round.

Features

Ranch house. 56

Green golf. 76



Hot spot. 82

ON THE COVER: *Carpet Design with Boat and Fish* by Duncan Grant

Courtauld Gallery, London

MORE CONTENTS ON FOLLOWING PAGE ➤