



# Sustainable Destination Award Good Practice Story

## Resort Town Waste Reduction Good Practice Story: Vail, Colorado

Waste diversion in a mountain resort community is a challenging endeavor. Vail is home to 5,400 year-round residents and welcomes 2.4 million visitors annually. Many employees that live and work within the town are seasonal and there is an influx of new employees and residents each year. Educating residents, employees, and tourists alike on effective recycling and waste diversion is an on-going challenge. In 2009, the Town of Vail was significantly below the county (22%) and national (34.5%) averages for recycling with a 9% recycling rate. As part of the Town's Environmental Sustainability Strategic Plan a goal was set to achieve a 25% recycling rate by 2019. In order to reach and exceed this goal, appropriate infrastructure, policy, and several waste reduction initiatives were needed. The first initiative implemented was outreach and education to the business community, and a partnership with Vail Resorts to utilize their drop off facility. One on one conversations, encouragement, training, and a lot of follow up was required to convince owners, managers, and staff that they should separate their recycling and tote it to a nearby loading dock. After several years of public outreach and work with haulers in the residential and multi-family sector, it was apparent that the most effective way to increase the town's diversion rate would be a change in policy. In 2013 the town began the stakeholder process to implement a recycling law in Vail, which included a large stakeholder process consisting of meetings with haulers, the business community, and public input sessions. In 2014 the Vail Town Council adopted a recycling ordinance requiring all residential and commercial entities to participate in recycling by law. As part of the ordinance, the Town of Vail also incorporated the 'Pay as You Throw' program, which financially incentivizes utilizing smaller trash receptacles and producing less trash. Recycling rates are embedded within the trash rates and customers are charged based on the size of their trash receptacle. The smaller the trash receptacle, the smaller the trash bill. The size of the recycling receptacle is not factored into the bill, so customers are incentivized to recycle more and produce less landfill-bound waste. The ordinance also requires mandatory data reporting by all waste haulers operating within the town. This allows tracking of waste and recycling tonnages, calculates diversion rates, and informs where education and outreach are most needed.

In order to spread the word about the recycling ordinance and offer resources to businesses and residents, the Love Vail website and marketing campaign was launched. The slogans "If you love it here, recycle here!" and "Some decisions are easier than others. Recycling is one of them." were posted throughout town. Collateral including reusable grocery bags, magnets, and lens clothes with lists of recyclable items were distributed to residents and visitors to help inspire waste reduction. In addition, a hotel recycling kit was developed and distributed with information on how to recycle,



# Sustainable Destination Award Good Practice Story

including informational tri-fold tents and refrigerator magnets listing what can be recycled and stickers for trash and recycling receptacles. In addition, staff implemented a strong and effective education and outreach campaign as neighborhoods, schools, and businesses were canvassed to educate on the recycling ordinance.

To provide additional resources, the Town of Vail partnered with Walking Mountains Science Center to develop the Waste Wizard recycling application, which can be downloaded on smart phones or accessed from the Town of Vail website. This allows anyone to look up whether specific items are recyclable and how to recycle them, helping people understand how to recycle right. The Town of Vail received grant funding to offer the Small Cart Exchange Program in order to increase awareness about the Pay as You Throw program. Vail residents could trade their larger 64-gallon or 96-gallon trash carts in for a smaller 32-gallon cart free of charge. All larger trash carts were converted into recycling carts for residents to encourage less trash production and increase recycling capacity. Participating residents each saved \$250 in the cost of the 32-gallon, wildlife resistant trash cart and realized a reduced trash for producing less waste. There were forty small carts exchanged which offered the potential for a 24 ton reduction in residential waste per year while increasing recycling capacity by 23.6 tons per year. This equates to a 0.28% reduction in overall municipal solid waste tonnage and a 0.74% increase in recycling tonnage per year. Kick the Bag Habit was another initiative established, which prohibited the use of plastic bags in grocery stores. Customers can either bring their own reusable bags or pay 10 cents per paper bag when checking out. The town provided free reusable bags to residents and visitors alike and offered “take a bag, leave a bag” stations around town that people could pick free bags up at or deposit extra bags they did not need. This effort reduces 4.5 million plastic bags being used annually to 300,000 paper bags being purchased. The 10-cent bag fee accumulates to roughly \$30,000 annually and goes back to the Town of Vail, which uses the funds to host Hard to Recycle events twice a year. Residents, employees, and visitors in the Town of Vail can bring household hazardous waste, electronic waste, and a variety of other items, such as vinyl banners and bike inner tubes, to be recycled free of charge. A paper shredding and recycling service is also offered at these events. Since 2016, these events have collected and recycled 61 tons of hard to recycle items. The town also provides a recycling drop site, where residents, employees, and visitors can drop off their cardboard, paper, and comingled recycling 24 hours a day.

There is a receptacle that also accepts old clothing and shoes that is taken to a local second hand, thrift store for resale. People can also take advantage of the ski and snowboard swap area, where old skis and snowboards can be dropped off and picked up to be reused by others. It is a great way to encourage reuse of difficult to recycle items. Through town operations, an initiative to replace single use, disposable coffee cups with durable mugs was undertaken. Every coffee station throughout town operated buildings was outfitted with durable, reusable coffee mugs and each



# Sustainable Destination Award Good Practice Story

employee was provided with a travel coffee mug. 27,000 single use coffee cups have been replaced with durable, reusable coffee mugs. In addition, all employees received a set of reusable bamboo cutlery to replace single use plastic silverware. Both initiatives have helped to build a culture of utilizing durable and reusable items as opposed to single use items. The Celebrate Green! program was established requiring all events with 2,500 or more attendees and three or more food vendors produced in the Town of Vail to provide Zero Waste services, including recycling and composting in order to divert as much waste from landfill as possible. All event producers serving food and drinks are required to utilize compostable service ware and cups as well. Town of Vail partners with Walking Mountains Science Center to offer Zero Waste education at recycling and composting stations at the weekly Farmer's Market throughout the summer months, which sees between 15,000-30,000 people in attendance each week. Many other events also provide the same Zero Waste education. The average diversion rate from all events held within the town, including the weekly Farmer's Markets, is 80.4 percent. In terms of diversion rates at events, this is quite an impressive number. Vail is exploring additional options including utilizing a mobile dishwashing station and requiring all event producers and vendors to utilize fully durable service ware and cups to increase the diversion rate even further. The Town of Vail also hosted the first Business Recycling Challenge, engaging seven businesses in the challenge. Participating businesses received a waste audit at the start of the challenge and received education and guidance to improve their waste diversion tactics over the following month. At the end of the challenge businesses improved their recycling rates from the average baseline of 49 percent to 57 percent. The winning business with highest diversion rate completed the challenge with an 84 percent recycling rate.

"The Recycling Challenge was a great experience that generated excitement with a little friendly competition," said Cassandra MacUmbler, assistant general manager of Vail Spa Condominiums. "The audits brought to light things people probably didn't know about as to what they could recycle and created an opportunity for all of us on the property to ask the experts about recycling," she said. Given the importance of reducing organics waste entering the landfill due their contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, especially methane, the Town of Vail partnered with two local waste haulers to bring a commercial and subscription residential compost program to town. Since its inception in 2018, over 140 tons of organic material has been composted and diverted from the landfill. In 2020 Vail will be conducting a pilot curbside compost program to determine if curbside compost would be an effective strategy to incorporate town-wide.

Vail Resorts developed a Commitment to Zero plan and aims to achieve a 2030 goal of "zero waste to landfill" by diverting 100 percent of the waste from its operations to more sustainable pathways. Currently at a 40 percent waste diversion rate across its entire operations, the Company has set its sights on an interim target of diverting 50 percent of its waste by 2020. Vail Resorts plans to achieve this goal by: improving its recycling and composting program; engaging with vendors to reduce



# Sustainable Destination Award Good Practice Story

packaging and to source recyclable and compostable products; working with local resort communities to increase options for reuse and diversion; and increasing awareness and engagement with employees and guests through signage, labeling and training. At the end of 2018, Vail reached its goal of a 25 percent waste diversion rate; however, the town experienced several challenges along the waste reduction journey. Strong partnerships with the waste haulers are critical for success, especially as it relates to the mandatory data reporting requirements. In the past year there have been several changes in management and ownership of local waste haulers, including the largest provider. These changes resulted in a lapse of and inconsistent data being reported, making it very difficult to compare 2019 rates to prior years. After a yearlong attempt, efforts to educate the new management were finally effective towards the end of the year.

The town clarified its expectations of the waste haulers and together we explored the challenges and were able to troubleshoot solutions. We look forward to a stronger partnership moving into 2020. In addition, enforcement of the town's ordinance could be more robust, ensuring a 100% participation rate while also working towards cleaner recycling streams with less contamination. After the initial education and outreach campaign took hold, the town's sustainability department shifted focus on other initiatives. While waste reduction education and outreach is still a priority, it did not receive as much support as it did when the ordinance was first adopted. Re-igniting the robust education and outreach campaign is critical in order to exceed the current recycling rate. Overcoming these challenges will result in higher diversion rates moving into the future. In 2019, the Colorado State of Recycling annual report shared that Vail is among the top three mountain communities with the highest recycling rate in the state. Even with the challenges at hand, Vail is proud of the progress made, increasing its waste diversion rate from 9 to 25 percent. The key success factors to improving Vail's recycling rate include developing policy, improving infrastructure, education and outreach, and continuous creation of new programs and opportunities. Moving into 2020, Town of Vail will develop new goals and programs in order to continue working towards and exceeding the national recycling rate, setting future sites on becoming a zero-waste destination. The Vail Destination authorizes Green Destinations and ITB Berlin to disseminate this good practice story and photos.

