

Transcription of ASC's Mike Kaplan remarks to Pitkin County Planning & Zoning Commission – February 16, 2021

Thanks, David. Hello everyone, thanks for giving us some time today and giving Pandora's some further consideration. I know you guys have had plenty of meetings on this and obviously many other things. And of course, you've already endorsed the Pandora plan so again we don't take it for granted that you're giving us some more time.

I'm here to set things up and to make sure you and the community at large know how important this application is to us (*Aspen Skiing Company*), and I'd submit, to the core of what we are about as a community.

We obviously all know that modern day Aspen was founded upon the concept of being a place of renewal, not only of the mind and body but also the spirit. From the beginning, this community embraced that vision, with real gusto. It was at the highest level. Obviously, the Goethe Festival bringing Albert Schweitzer, the great philosopher and luminary, to the US for his first and only time; the 1950 FIS world championships, at this barely formed ski area—that was the first time those were held outside of Europe, and they're going to be back for the first time this year, at least in the form of free ski and snowboard...which tells you eventually things come around full circle; the construction of the Benedict music tent; the world longest chairlift that got put in.

From the get-go, we've been groundbreakers, trailblazers and leaders.

And I think our community sort of retains that spirit of leadership and that pursuit of excellence. And I see we at the Ski Company try to fully embrace that approach in all we do...and I'd submit it's really in our collective DNA.

A few Ski Company examples on this, going on for decades...we were very early in many, many things including embracing snowmaking and grooming. When the gondola went in, it was the world's longest single stage lift; we had the first open boundary policy in Colorado; we opened Highland Bowl when many said that couldn't be done; and then more recently we've done things like creating a mid-mountain beginner area at Snowmass; being really permissive and progressive on our uphill policy; putting on world renowned events and now becoming a leader in mountain biking...and again, as a community, our recent in-the-gold status has really been a powerful symbol of that ongoing commitment to the vision.

Obviously we're a for-profit business and many of these things are direct drivers of profit to the Aspen Skiing Company. I would say all of them generate economic vitality for this town, and the majority of them also enhance the quality of life for our permanent residents, and really build on our desire to be the greatest ski town, the greatest year-round mind/body/spirit town that you could possibly imagine.

We view Pandora's as a continuation of that aspiration.

Obviously, this is dragging on for a while, and to us it's exposing an increasing tension. Let's face it, I think we all know that comes from the intense development pressure that our community has been facing for some time and hasn't let up with Covid. B. But I want to point out that it's primarily residential development pressure, and I think there is this misplaced belief that it's about commercial development and it really isn't. And I think this whole process for us has revealed a fundamental problem in our ability to sustain our core business, skiing. And that's really why I'm here today...that's obviously something I'm passionate about, and not only core to my being but also core to our viability as a company.

So, I see [the] residential sector is a critical, critical part of our community's ecosystem, but we all know, we're all residents, that's there's this natural tendency to, the second you move in, to become a bit of a Nimby—you don't want your view to change, you don't want your backyard to change. It's a natural individual tendency, and it's really the role of this body and our elected officials to check that tendency and make sure that's balanced against the broader community's goals and vision. And that's what we think is pertinent to this Pandora's application.

But the Pandora area has long been within the ski area's permit area and long been assumed to be part of our future plans so that we could accommodate the changing skiing patterns, the new technology, the evolving recreational trends and usage, which obviously we are all seeing and we're going to hear more about today.

We have been exceptional neighbors up there. Tons of evidence—the fact that we support and provide snowmobile parking on our private land; we respond in conjunction [with] and under the authority of the Sheriff's office and working with Search and Rescue, to emergencies; we support residential needs, big and small; we enforce our obligations, preventing mountain biking use on Richmond Ridge and managing road trips on Little Annie road, and all those things we do on a day-to-day basis, and other things, policy-wise. We've maintained an open boundary policy, benefitting that area. We've continued to embrace uphill access, really in the spirit of our community's, what I call, "mountain town ethos".

But at the end of the day we are a ski company and everything we do in this community is dependent on our ability to stay competitive, to address the real operational needs that we have, and meeting them as they change.

Let's face it—Aspen has changed, Richmond Ridge has changed, skiing has changed, backcountry usage has changed, customer expectations have changed. And Aspen Mountain has got to change and evolve to stay relevant, to maintain that leadership position that we all embrace and appreciate.

So, while obviously we know that staff is recommending that skiing take a back seat to this broader master planning process, we think it's taking a back seat to residential development and residential policy making. And we think that's a big mistake. You know, the ski area is not included in any of the caucuses. We aren't invited to the meeting, we don't have a vote. We don't have a seat at that table.

Fortunately, we do have the prescribed process, which Suzanne I think mentioned – the Ski Area Master Planning process. We've been following that in this application for three years, as we all know too well, and there's this circular logic and timing disconnect, which we just talked about, that's really crippling for us and really a serious threat for our ability to maintain our leadership position.

So we're looking for your confirmation that skiing is not just consistent with the County's Comprehensive Plan, but a fundamental driver of the Plan. That's critical not only to this project but to our ability to continue to operate as a business.

So we're going to share with you a history of rural and remote zoning, the treatment of skiing as a use within that zone. You'll also hear a bit of an argument regarding Pandora's place within surrounding master plans and management plans.

We obviously respect and recognize this commission's role in evaluating master plans, their history and intent of zoning and allowable uses, and hope that in reaffirming your approval of this rezoning we can also reaffirm our ski areas' operational rights within the entire community.

At the end of the day, we're a ski town. If 2020 and 2021...I apologize, I hope they're not blending together...show us anything, it's the toll that our community takes when our economic foundation is rocked like it was. When the closing of the ski area, restaurants and lodging throughout town hits, we now know unfortunately what it does to us, what it does to our citizens, what it does to our unemployment rates, to the economy. It has real impacts. We also saw that closing the ski area didn't drive anyone, everyone into their homes. Our community kept recreating, continued to enjoy our open lands but did so on other, less controlled open spaces. And that's something we're worried about. So we are committed here at the company to provide safe, managed access to our open and recreational lands, provide infrastructure necessary to accommodate the recreational pressure which continues to mount while minimizing the impact on community resources.

Change is hard, we all know that, but hindsight definitely gives us perspective. And just looking back on the on-mountain improvements we've made over the years, we think the community at large, including both our guests and locals, would never consider undoing them. Examples...longing for Aspen Mountain without the Silver Queen Gondola or Walsh's, no, nobody's doing that. Looking to close Hanging Valley Wall at Snowmass, no, that would suck. The idea of Highland Bowl not being opened and something we can summit whenever we so desire...you know, we all would not tolerate that. The terrain extending to the bottom, getting rid of the SJ traverse (I'll tell you what that stands for, sometime, not in public), we wouldn't go for that, it would be unfathomable.

I truly believe that in ten years we will be looking back on adding Pandora's the same way. It's been 40 years since Aspen Mountain added any terrain and to be honest, it shows. And it's long overdue.

Thank you, David. I'll hand it back to you.