

No workers, no resort?

Imagine the Wood River Valley with no workers.

This is no idle exercise because too many people take local businesses and services for granted.

Much as most people don't know where their food and water come from or where their waste goes, most don't give a thought to the people who create the valley's considerable comforts and maintain the services and infrastructure upon which life here depends.

Workers are like oil. Few think about them until the price becomes prohibitive or the resource becomes unavailable.

In the last 30 years, people with jobs in the valley's resort economy have suffered a kind of insulting disdain.

Time after time, in public hearings in the North Valley, homeowners have stood up and opposed homes, townhouses, condos or apartments for workers to be built in—or even near--their neighborhoods.

Ketchum homeowners defeated apartments in West Ketchum, outlawed mobile homes, defeated affordable high density mixed-income residential developments in East Ketchum and on Main Street.

The city is regularly berated and threatened with lawsuits when elected officials dare to think about constructing workforce housing on city land or offering incentives to entice developers to include workforce housing in larger projects.

The line that's regularly used by opponents is, "We're in favor of workforce housing, but this is just not the right place for it."

When faced with the fact that Aspen, Colo., a competing resort area, has kept a large percentage of its workforce in the city by incorporating workforce housing, opponents' common response is, "Sun Valley isn't Aspen."

They're right.

Unlike Ketchum and Sun Valley, Aspen long ago understood the threat of far-flung and disappearing workers. It understood the chicken and egg nature of the question, "If there are no workers are there visitors, retirees or second-home owners?" In a hearing a few years ago, one man summarized the issue like this: "Let me get this straight," he said. "I'm good enough to fix your car, but not good enough to live in your neighborhood?"

With the escalating price of oil making long commutes prohibitive for workers, the matter of locating worker housing close to jobs is critical to the economy.

There are plenty of other nice communities around where hardworking young people and families are welcome.

How long can the Wood River Valley afford to drive them away? Will housing opponents prevail until the day workers are nearly gone? And what, pray tell, will the valley become on that day?

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