

Snowmass Sun

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Council signs letters in support of uniform COVID-19 testing, Great American Outdoors act; meets with Aspen School District officials

Snowmass [SNOWMASS](#) | 1d ago



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At its July 13 work session, Snowmass Town Council agreed to sign onto a letter to Gov. Jared Polis in support of creating a uniform COVID-19 testing strategy across Colorado, and a letter to Rep. Scott Tipton in support of the Great American Outdoors Act. Council also met with Aspen School District board members and officials. Here's the recap:

UNIFORM VIRUS TESTING AND OUTDOORS ACT

Town Council agreed to sign onto two letters to Colorado government officials related to COVID-19 testing and the Great American Outdoors Act on July 13.

One was a letter written by the town to Gov. Jared Polis and Jill Hunsaker Ryan, executive director of the Colorado Department of Health and Environment, urging them to come up with a statewide, uniform and comprehensive COVID-19 testing strategy.

The letter says Town Council strongly encourages state leadership to “develop not only the uniform strategy for testing across the state, but also build the infrastructure to support a robust testing system,” which is crucial to keeping the economy and healthcare systems going.

As explained by Mayor Markey Butler, who also chairs the Pitkin County Board of Public Health, Pitkin, Garfield and Eagle County are all utilizing different COVID-19 testing methods, which creates confusion and inconsistency.

She and area public health officials believe the state needs to decide on one effective, efficient COVID-19 test for all Colorado counties to use, and needs to be more consistent with its messaging on who should get tested (people who are symptomatic) and who should not (people who are well and asymptomatic).

“So we have inconsistency of testing, inconsistency in terms of messaging and one last little leg of the stool is the amount of time it's taking to get results from the state lab, and that number is going up,” Butler said. Locally, healthcare providers have recently had to wait around 8 to 10 days for test results, she said.

Town Council expressed unanimous approval to sign and send the letter to Polis and Ryan, though Councilman Bill Madsen wondered whether sending letters like this is the most effective approach to creating change.

“We're continually sending these letters of encouragement that we want some action... are we having an impact, are we going about it the right way? How do we get the end result that we really want?” Madsen asked his fellow council members.

“We are in a very challenging situation and I think this letter starts to address it and I'm definitely in support of it, but just throwing it out there, is there something else we can be doing?”

Similar letters from other municipality and county governing bodies in the Pitkin, Garfield and Eagle county area are also expected to be sent to Polis and Ryan as well.

The second letter Town Council agreed to sign July 13 was a letter to Representative Scott Tipton, urging him to support the Great American Outdoors Act.

The act establishes the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, which will receive 50% of all federal revenues from oil, gas, coal or alternative/renewable energy on federal lands and waters from 2021 through 2025 but not to exceed \$1.9 billion for any fiscal year.

The National Park Service, Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and Bureau of Indian Education can use money from the fund for priority maintenance projects on federal land that have been deferred. The act also makes funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund permanent.

The letter to Tipton will be sent out to Colorado news organizations as an op-ed by The Mountain Pact, a nonprofit that “empowers mountain communities to build resilience in the face of economic and environmental stresses through a shared voice on federal policy related to climate, public lands and outdoor recreation,” according to its website.

Council expressed unanimous approval to co-sign the letter with other Mountain Pact participants with little discussion.

“I don’t have any questions, it’s like of course we’re going to sign this,” Butler said.

SCHOOL OFFICIALS TALK BUDGET WITH COUNCIL

At the July 13 work session, Aspen School District officials also talked with Town Council about the district’s 2021 budget, and both the potential for asking voters to renew the Snowmass Village Education Property Tax Mill Levy in the November election and for partnering with the town to provide more employee housing for teachers.

In a brief presentation, Linda Warhoe, chief financial officer for the district explained how public school funding works in Colorado and what the Aspen School District’s main revenue sources are.

She said the district is also fortunate to receive support outside of its “school finance formula” from the three public funding organizations: The Aspen Educational Foundation, the Aspen Public Education Fund and the Snowmass Village Public Education Fund. The Snowmass nonprofit provides \$510,000 annually, money that comes directly from the Snowmass Village Education Property Tax Mill Levy that’s set to sunset at the end of 2022, town documents show.

The \$510,000 from Snowmass directly supports the district’s English as a Second Language (ESL), Talented and Gifted (TAG) and district IT or technology integrator programs.

“I just want to point out that these are all sprinkles on our coffee cup but if it were not for these sources of revenue that we receive, we wouldn’t be able to provide these services,” Warhoe said, referring to the three public funding organizations that support the district.

District officials also emphasized that they’ve incurred additional and unexpected costs this past school year do to COVID-19 — including online learning and technology costs and a more expensive commencement ceremony this year than in years past— and anticipate seeing a decrease in its revenues due to the pandemic. The total school district budget for 2021 is around \$30 million.

Warhoe also shared some current district data on how many employees and students live in Snowmass Village, showing 30 district employees live in Snowmass (10% of district staff), and 340 students enrolled with the district are from the village (20.5% of district students).

“I think (these statistics) tell us a very big story about how our partnership with the (town) is critical,” Warhoe said.

After the presentation, Butler and other council members said they needed to see more hard numbers and details on how the district calculated its \$30 million budget for 2021, what the cost per student would be, and some data on how the districts revenue sources and expenses compare to similar school districts in the state and the nation.

“The data is very important, we’re pretty financially driven here in Snowmass Village and the more data we have, the more we can talk to our constituents in terms of support of any tax initiative,” Butler said.

School officials said they would send more information to council for further discussion and consideration.

Town staff also said they would work closely with district officials on determining how employee housing for Aspen School District staff could be incorporated into the town’s ongoing, in the works master housing plan.

Outside of the budget and housing discussion, Town Council also asked school district officials what they’re thinking the fall 2020 start to the school year will look like.

David Baugh, the district’s new superintendent, said the Aspen School District is preparing to open “as close to normal as possible,” based on the recommendations of both local and national expert advice.

“Public health and public education are very closely connected, so we’re monitoring the situation daily and we’re working very closely with people to advise us,” Baugh said. “We’re continuing to craft the plan for opening...we do think it would be great for our kids if we can get them back in the schools, so we’re preparing for that.”

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