



How to Save a Ski Town

Nov 15, 2021

All over the West, a housing crisis is causing workforce shortages, crippling local businesses, and threatening the culture and existence of mountain towns as we know them. But amid the doom and gloom, some people are fighting for solutions.

[\(https://www.outsideonline.com/culture/essays-culture/how-to-save-a-ski-town-west-tourism-economy/\)](https://www.outsideonline.com/culture/essays-culture/how-to-save-a-ski-town-west-tourism-economy/)



GLORIA LIU

Gloria Liu is a freelance journalist based in Golden, Colorado.

Once upon a time, there was a magical town named Crested Butte. It was nestled in a valley in southwest Colorado among beautiful, towering peaks and shivering aspen groves. The mountains made the town difficult to get to—it lay, quite literally, at the end

of a two-lane road. There were a couple of dirt roads in, too, but after the late-fall snowstorms, they became impassable. And so the mountains protected the town.

For a long time things were good. In the winter, there was powder to ski; in the summer, there were trails to ride. Most important, there were not so many visitors, at least compared to other mountain towns. Crested Butte was far from the constant roar and snaking brake lights of I-70, Denver's thoroughfare to the mountains; and some might also say the family who owned the ski resort did a pretty crappy job of marketing it. But the residents liked it this way. Their town had not sold its soul for tourist dollars and high-speed lifts like Aspen or Vail. They still had their T-bars, their funky culture, their cruiser bikes parked unlocked on the streets.

But things began to change. Crested Butte was discovered, in the same way that other magical towns were being discovered. More people began to visit, and those people told their friends and posted glowy photos on Instagram. More people bought second homes there, driving up the price of real estate. Then came the Airbnbs and the VRBOs, which allowed second-home owners to earn a lot more money renting to tourists than to the people who actually lived and worked there. The locals found it harder and harder to afford a place to rent or buy in town. They began to leave, moving 35 minutes downvalley to Gunnison or disappearing from the area altogether. By 2017, [some wondered](#) if Airbnb was going to kill this, and other, magical towns.

Then came the pandemic. Maybe this part of the story you know. Unchained from their desks, the hordes of newly remote white-collar workers descended upon all the magical mountain towns, and in just one year, the median list price for a home in Crested Butte jumped 40 percent, to \$895,000. Rents soared, too—20 to 40 percent in Colorado ski towns like Crested Butte, according to one [June 2021 report](#). Meanwhile, both for-sale and rental inventory plummeted. Now it was nearly impossible for locals to find housing.

And one day in the summer of 2021, the town simply stopped working. Restaurants began to shut down for parts of the day or entire days of the week. “Help Wanted” signs appeared up and down the main street of Elk Avenue. It didn't matter that the sidewalks teemed with tourists freed from COVID lockdowns and ready to spend. Lines grew. People waited an hour and a half, two hours for food. What's happening? visitors grumped.

The newspapers reported on the problem: it was so hard to find affordable housing in town that there weren't enough people left to *work* in town. It wasn't just Crested Butte, either. The headlines popped up all summer long:

“Housing in Jackson: Is This a Crisis?”

“Ketchum Has Plenty of Available Jobs but Workers Can’t Afford Housing”

“Tahoe’s Hiring Crisis Unraveling the Region’s Small Businesses”

In July, NPR shone its spotlight on Crested Butte: [“Short on Workers, This Resort Town Has Stopped Marketing Itself to Tourists.”](#) Indeed, by that point the valley’s tourism association was running ads in the local paper informing visitors about the housing shortage and asking them to be patient with slower than usual service. The window of the iconic Wooden Nickel steakhouse displayed an “Employee Crisis Limited Menu” notice. The sign went on to explain that, on top of having “barely enough employees to run the restaurant,” some cooks had just quit. “We’re sorry we’re unable to provide the menu you expected,” it told would-be diners. “Thank you for joining us on this challenging evening.” Across the street, at the Brick Oven Pizzeria, someone had affixed a sticker on the wall of the men’s bathroom that read, simply, “SAVE CB.”

The magical town, it seemed, was in serious trouble.

Reality check: unless you’re one of the über-wealthy, living in a mountain town has never been the stuff of fairy tales. The limited supply of affordable housing for workers has been a challenge for decades. Ritzy-glitzy Aspen claims the oldest workforce-housing program among North American ski towns. As early as the 1970s, it began slapping deed restrictions—requirements like maximum income levels for buyers or maximum resale values written into the title of a property—onto homes in order to preserve their affordability.

Crested Butte’s own affordable-housing program was inspired by Aspen. In the 1980s and ’90s, the town acquired large tracts of land for future housing development and incentivized property owners to build accessory dwelling units above businesses and garages to house local workers. Deed-restricted residences still represent 25 percent of Crested Butte’s housing today. In 2017, its town council also had the prescience to slow the growth of Airbnbs and other short-term rentals by capping the total number of licenses at 30 percent of all area homes.

But all that groundwork hasn’t been enough. A [May 2021 Gunnison Valley housing-needs assessment](#) estimates that the valley is short 490 homes to accommodate its total required workforce. Since 2016, only two out of three local workers in the North Valley—which encompasses the towns of Crested Butte and Mount Crested Butte (populations 1,723 and 876, respectively), as well as neighboring unincorporated areas like Crested Butte South—have actually been able to *live* in the North Valley. The rest commute from Gunnison or farther away. As depicted in a recent clip by [Vice News](#), others even live in their vehicles in the surrounding national forest. And Crested Butte is hardly the worst off among its peers: in Pitkin County, where Aspen is located, just 40 percent of workers live where they work; in the North Tahoe–Truckee region in California, that figure is only 50 percent; and Vail houses less than 30 percent of its workforce.

When the situation reached its breaking point over the summer, Crested Butte officials acted swiftly. In June, the town council declared a state of emergency, the first time a Colorado municipality had used the designation for a housing crisis. This enabled them to bypass certain municipal codes and provide some immediate relief, like purchasing a six-bedroom bed-and-breakfast and converting it into dorm-style housing for local workers. They also began allowing RV and tent camping on private property in town. In July the council issued a moratorium on new short-term rental licenses for a year, and officials resumed discussions about a controversial tax on empty homes, which they had started in 2020 but tabled for the pandemic.

Similarly urgent conversations were happening in resort towns all over the Mountain West. “I’m not sure I know what the one solution is,” says George Ruther, housing director for the town of Vail. “I think I know what the solution is not. We’re not going to build our way out of this problem. It’s too costly. I don’t think it’s going to be solely by regulatory means either. Vail, like Park City, like Jackson Hole, like Aspen—all of these communities have regulatory land-use tools like inclusionary zoning or development impact fees. But guess what we all have? We all have housing problems.”



Will Dujardin

(Photo: Courtesy Will Dujardin)



Crested Butte

homes (Photo: krblokhin/Getty)

The boy came from New Jersey. The son of a second-home owner, Will Dujardin arrived in the magical town of Crested Butte by way of the twice-annual ski trips his family took to their condo on the mountain. As a teen he was a talented freeskiier, good enough to compete against other young men from around the country, and when he was 22 he returned after college, thinking he'd ski-bum for a year before getting a "real job back east." But then he discovered mountain biking, which was how he learned that the summers in Crested Butte were even better than the winters.

Seasons passed. Dujardin became the head coach of the youth freeride program on the mountain, and it was a good job, a rewarding job, but only ever a seasonal job. So the rest of the year he painted houses and bussed tables. As time went on, he saw friends leave the valley because they couldn't afford to stay. He watched properties that used to house families convert to Airbnbs. Finally, in 2017, he decided to do something about it. He ran for town council, was elected, and in 2019 was nominated to mayor pro tem by his fellow council members.

On town council Dujardin spoke passionately about the importance of affordable housing. He went to meetings, answered emails, and let concerned citizens bend his ear at the bar. There were wins, like watching friends buy first homes in a newly completed affordable-housing development. But there were losses, too. Over four years serving on council, Dujardin learned that compromise was the only way to get shit done, but it also often meant that everyone was a little unhappy at the end.

In an ironic twist of fate, last spring Dujardin, who is now 35, lost his own housing when his landlord attempted to sell the two-bedroom rental Dujardin had always shared with two or three housemates. A few months later, he managed to buy a small condo in town with the help of some family money. He hates that detail, but he shares it openly because it proves his point that the only people who can make it in Crested Butte are the privileged.

The first time we talk on the phone, I tell Dujardin that I'd like to do a story about not just the doom and gloom of the housing crisis but the solutions being proposed and the people fighting to save these towns. People like him. It's early August, and the months of city council meetings that have gone past midnight have clearly worn on him. "I appreciate that sentiment," he sighs, "but it's been really challenging to keep the solutions forward-thinking and positive when you're constantly badgered by people who are self-righteous in their beliefs."

Mountain towns have certain characteristics that make housing particularly challenging, including topography, small budgets, and limited availability of land (78 percent of the acreage in Gunnison County, for example, is federally owned by agencies like the Forest Service). But the most formidable opponent facing Dujardin and his compatriots is one facing affordable housing proponents everywhere: NIMBYism. "This is a lot of the reason you see most of the opposition," says Roland Mason, Gunnison County's commissioner and chair of the Gunnison Valley Regional Housing Authority. "People don't want the town to change from when they moved here."

Mason and Dujardin both cite the doomed Brush Creek development, which would have added 156 units of deed-restricted housing in a neighborhood that was also home to a golf course and a country club. The project was initially proposed in 2017 as a 240-unit property, but over the course of a two-year review process, it was whittled down to 156 units.

All along the way it met with fierce opposition. At an October 2017 meeting for public comment, over 200 people showed up. Some of the project's opponents formed an organization called Friends of Brush Creek, which Dujardin says was primarily second-home owners. I couldn't verify the makeup of the group, but I did find a sampling of opposition letters written to the council ahead of another [October 2017 meeting](#). From one: "Like all other homeowners in Skyland, we purchased our property because of the

beauty of the area and the thoughtfully planned development of housing,” wrote Charles and Jennifer Bess. “To allow such a drastic change in density would result in a new urban-level community in the middle of a suburban and country setting, a change that would be unconscionable.”

It wasn't just wealthy homeowners, either. Influential long-time residents like Mark Reaman, editor of the *Crested Butte News*, also opposed the project. Reaman wrote numerous op-eds against it, including one in September 2017 titled “[Bringing a Taste of Denver to Brush Creek](#),” in which he compared the development to “what might as well be an Aurora apartment complex,” referencing a diverse and sprawling Front Range suburb. Eventually, the developer said that the project was no longer financially feasible with all the stipulations added in the review process. In October 2019, the proposal died. New developments aren't the only worker-housing initiatives that are contentious. Attempts to rein in short-term rentals in some towns have also met with strong resistance. In Telluride, Colorado, where the joke goes that the billionaires have pushed out the millionaires, citizens placed an initiative on the November ballot for the town's first-ever short-term rental cap. When I speak to Telluride mayor DeLanie Young in August, she tells me that she's received dozens of emails in response, mostly against the measure. The writers are almost all second-home owners, and some own three or four properties, she says. As in many ski towns, second-home owners possess a significant portion of the housing stock in Telluride—[54.4 percent](#) of homes in town qualify as vacant, according to 2019 data from the U.S. Census Bureau. The notes Young received have common refrains: *People are going to lose their jobs*, is one. *This is going to ruin your economy*, is another. (The citizens' measure ultimately did not pass, though a measure to put a two-year moratorium on new short-term rental licenses did.)

Young is a first-term mayor who, in a past life, was the programs manager for the regional housing authority. Prior to that, she was a librarian. When she was running for office, people thought of her as “the housing lady,” she says.

“I think the thing people need to be reminded of is, this housing crisis is not unique to our town or community,” she tells me at the end of our call. “This is happening all over our entire country and other countries. We are, as a human race, in severe need of a complete culture shift in so many ways, and housing is one small piece of that. I think it's just important that people look outside themselves, because this is affecting so many people. It's horrifying. Shelter! It's a basic human need.”

One of the most promising solutions to the affordable-housing crisis in ski country comes, ironically, from Vail, a town where the median listing price for a home hit \$1.8 million in September. Launched in 2017, Vail's award-winning [InDeed](#) program has increased deed-restricted housing in town by 48 percent and aims to add 1,000 deed-restricted homes by 2027.

InDeed was designed by Vail housing director George Ruther. When Ruther began researching a workforce-housing solution, he found some alarming stats: based on 2016 tax records, 4,753 of the 7,209 homes in Vail were unoccupied—66 percent. Meanwhile,

nearly 90 percent of new homes were purchased by nonresidents, and these properties rarely reverted to local ownership. All this in a town sitting at the bottom of a sheer valley, surrounded by Forest Service land. “Knowing we didn’t have the land to build, we had to come up with a way to protect these existing dwellings,” he says.

Ruther is the source who earlier made the point that punitive regulations alone won’t fix the housing problem. InDeed, he says, works well in part because it presents real incentives for homeowners to participate—it’s more of a carrot instead of a stick.

Deed restrictions have long been a tool used to preserve affordable housing by attaching certain requirements to the sale or use of a home. What makes InDeed different is its simplicity: while other deed restrictions may dictate a home’s resale value or an occupant’s income level, InDeed simply requires that the home is lived in by at least one person—the homeowner or a renter—who works in Eagle County. While it doesn’t limit the eventual sale price, it does limit the market of potential buyers, thus tying the price to local wages.

For the right to change the covenants of a deed, Vail pays the homeowner 15 to 20 percent of the home’s market value—on average, about \$69,000. The owner can collect that payout today, without selling their house. When they do eventually sell, their deed restricts eligible buyers to residents who are employed by an Eagle County business. The house is thus returned to the local market immediately and permanently—the deed restriction follows the home into perpetuity—and Vail pays nothing more to maintain or administer it.

This makes the program incredibly cost effective. According to the [Vail Daily](#), from the program’s inception in 2017 to September 2020, the town acquired 153 deed restrictions for approximately \$10.5 million, securing housing for 340 workers. By comparison, in 2003 it cost Vail \$20 million to acquire an apartment complex where 288 residents live and which Vail incurs expenses to operate on an ongoing basis. (The money for InDeed originally came from Vail’s capital-improvement budget, but in November the town approved a 0.5 percent sales-tax increase to fund InDeed and other housing programs.)

Crested Butte was discovered, in the same way that other magical towns were being discovered. More people began to visit, and those people told their friends and posted glowy photos on Instagram.

Ruther says there has been surprisingly little opposition to InDeed, which is why he often touts it as “NIMBY-resistant.” (“Being from the housing world,” he says, “I can’t call anything NIMBY-*proof*.”) As he explains it, the deed restrictions are on existing properties, so any impacts to density, traffic, or views have already been realized. “What I tell people when they question a Vail InDeed purchase in their neighborhood is, the only thing they have to worry about is they’re going to have someone living in the house next door,” he says. “They’re going to have a neighbor in their neighborhood. Imagine that.”

More changes are afoot in Vail Valley. In July, Eagle County passed a \$5.4 million plan called Bold Housing Moves that includes still other innovative solutions, like a program that will allow the county to step in as a cash buyer for a local resident when they're bidding for a home. Another part of the program will provide cash for the majority of a down payment in exchange for a deed restriction on the house. Kim Bell Williams, Eagle County's housing director, says that she expects the result of initiatives like these to be the eventual creation of two distinct housing markets: a free market and a local's market.

Curious what that two-market system might look like? Take a trip up north to Whistler, British Columbia, a resort town that houses 80 percent of its workforce. Here the deed-restricted market operates distinctly from the free market, says Whistler Housing Authority general manager Marla Zucht. Whistler's deed restrictions do impose a resale price, tying home appreciation to inflation. However, Zucht says, WHA-managed homes span the economic continuum so that buyers can build equity by buying larger homes as their family grows. (This is also the plan in Eagle County.) Residents regularly graduate to the free market, Zucht says. "But we also have owners in the free market who want to sell out and buy into ours, because the communities are vibrant, they're full. It's where the kids are playing on the streets."

Like InDeed, the WHA enjoys broad political support. "Twenty years ago there'd be opposition if there was a public hearing for a new development, and we really don't see that anymore," says Zucht. "I think there's just a really good understanding of who it benefits—it's the school teachers, the doctors." With 50 percent of the local workforce in deed-restricted housing, "you couldn't be within a social circle and not know someone living in affordable housing."

It's a Monday evening, August 16, and the Crested Butte town council is convening for a critical meeting. Its members will be voting on ballot language for the proposed "community preservation tax," a fee imposed on properties that either aren't lived in or rented long-term. Commonly known as an empty-home tax, only two cities in North America—Oakland, California, and Vancouver, British Columbia—have something like it. If approved tonight, the tax will go on the November ballot.

The meeting takes place in a converted high school classroom. Six council members, including Will Dujardin, sit facing the audience at the front of the room; the seventh member, Mona Merrill, is projected on a screen via Zoom. Dujardin wears a Hawaiian shirt patterned with bright-pink flowers and green palm trees. His strawberry-blond hair is pulled back into a bun.

At the beginning of the meeting we learn that while school is starting in Crested Butte next week, no school buses will be running. Council member Jason MacMillan, a clean-cut forty-something professional sitting next to Dujardin, says, "We have zero out of four routes sorted because..."

“We have no drivers based in the North Valley,” finishes town manager Dara MacDonald, who wears her glasses perched atop her head.

MacMillan looks pointedly around the room. “Just to give extra context for the discussion we’re going to have tonight,” he says.

It’s now 7:40 P.M. The room is mostly full, a motley mix of citizens ranging widely in age and style of dress (though all appear to be white). MacDonald begins to review the proposal: a tax of \$2,500 a year on homes not being used as a primary residence or a long-term rental at least six months of the year, coupled with a 0.5 percentage-point increase in the city sales tax. Also on the ballot is a 2.5 percentage-point increase to the local vacation-rental tax. The proceeds from all three taxes will be used for affordable-housing programs. But it’s the empty-home tax that’s controversial.

As MacDonald talks, the audience grows fidgety. Butts shift, floorboards creak, knees bounce. This is the second meeting where the public has gotten to comment on the tax, and a homeowner from Houston opens up the discussion on a surprisingly positive note. He gives “kudos” to the council for arriving at what he calls a “palatable” tax amount of \$2,500, compared to the \$10,000 floated earlier this summer. From there, however, multiple people express concern that the tax will be divisive for the community. A tan man with a white ponytail points out that second-home owners will bear the burden of the tax, but they can’t vote on it. A woman with short gray hair stands up to say that the proposed tax has “tarnished ...some of the love” she and other second-home owners feel for Crested Butte. A few others address a concern that second-home owners will stop donating to the local nonprofits. A young woman with an undercut who “works four jobs and hasn’t done anything fun since June” says that while she understands that second-home owners think the tax is unfair, “I can’t enjoy my life, and that seems unfair, too.”

Now it’s the council members’ turn to speak. “Folks are worried about this tax being divisive, but the reality is that our community is splintering already,” says 31-year-old Jasmine Whelan, the council’s youngest member. Dujardin goes next, pointing out that tying the empty-home tax with an increase in the sales tax allows locals to share in the burden: “This is our way of coming together,” he says. MacMillan follows: “This community is something I’ve appreciated since I started coming here in 1991. I hope we can stabilize and save what is left.” He also thanks the citizens who have shown up all summer: “A lot of you I’ve seen here every meeting the past two months, and I really appreciate that.”

Mayor Jim Schmidt is the only council member who speaks in opposition to the tax, citing the unfairness of focusing the tax burden on one group, as well as using a flat tax versus one that’s based on home valuation. (Council member Mallika Magner points out that, per advice from the town’s attorney, Colorado law would not allow the latter.) Schmidt votes against the ballot language, but the six other council members vote yes, officially placing the tax on the November ballot. The room explodes in conversation.

Dujardin is ecstatic. “Two months ago, I never thought we would have gotten here so quickly,” he tells me.

He may have good reason to be optimistic. Vancouver passed its empty-home tax in 2016 and followed it with strong short-term rental restrictions in 2018. A [2019 report by the city](#) says that tenanted properties increased by 16 percent from 2017 to 2019, and a [2020 report](#) by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation showed that in 2019 alone, 8,824 condo apartments were converted to long-term rentals, likely as a result of these policies.

In addition, if Crested Butte’s proposed taxes get voted in, they will provide a crucial source of ongoing funding for affordable housing, to the tune of approximately \$1.9 million a year by 2023—a huge deal for this small town.

Nonprofit solutions have been touted by some as a fix for the mountain-town housing crisis, and certainly my sources told me we need every solution in play right now. But donations and grants are by nature less reliable than state or municipal tax revenues. In Big Sky, Montana, for example, the Big Sky Community Housing Trust, which is developing new units and piloting other solutions to the community’s housing crisis, is structured as a nonprofit. In part because Big Sky is unincorporated, and because Montana does not have a sales tax, real estate transfer tax, or inclusionary zoning laws that might otherwise provide funding for housing solutions, the trust receives a significant amount of its operational funding from donors and grants. When I ask Laura Seyfang, its executive director, how she knows she can count on this funding year after year, she says, “That is an excellent question, and it keeps me awake at night sometimes.”

It’s 11 P.M. by the time we get to the end of the agenda, and Schmidt asks if anyone has any other business to discuss. Dujardin raises his hand. “I do.”

He gets out a piece of paper, on which he’s typed a lengthy screed. It’s a parting message: he’s resigning from town council after tonight.

This year was hard for Dujardin. In addition to losing his home, he was haunted by the many conversations he had with friends and community members about their housing troubles. Even though he eventually resolved his own, he hated that he could only do so with assistance. All of it made him feel that a future in town for the family he hoped to have one day with his fiancéé was unachievable. In July he found the year-round coaching job he’d always wanted—in Salt Lake City. In the fall, he planned to leave Crested Butte for good.

“It’s been such an honor to serve this town,” he reads from the paper, his voice cracking with emotion. “I almost made it four years on council, and you bet I wish it was more.” He urges his fellow council members to continue to proactively address issues like affordable housing and to push to make the town truly inclusive instead of upholding an illusion that the “Crested Butte dream” is accessible to everyone. “We’re no good as a society if we can’t take care of ourselves and our weakest, and this goes for us as a municipality and a country,” he says. Crested Butte exceptionalism, as he calls it, “gave us a false sense of security. We thought what happened in other resort towns couldn’t happen here, or it wouldn’t be as bad when it did.”

“I have faith that CB can get it right, even if that faith has been rattled recently and I find myself pursuing my career elsewhere,” Dujardin reads in closing. To his fellow council members and the citizens of Crested Butte, he says, “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Off to the side, the town clerk is crying. Dujardin’s eyes are wet, too. MacMillan puts a hand on his shoulder.



The Crested Butte Vinotok festival, which serves as a metaphor for the town and the battle it’s fighting against greater economic forces (Photo: Courtesy Will Dujardin)

Every fall, around the time the aspen trees shed their golden leaves, Crested Butte celebrates a weeklong autumn festival called Vinotok. On the final night, locals hold a massive bonfire at the four-way intersection on Elk Avenue. There they burn the Grump, an effigy that represents their grievances and troubles, but which also serves as a symbol of humanity’s crimes against the earth: in 2018, the Grump was a tiny house that represented short-term rentals; in 2019, it was a giant clown holding a sign that read “Sale,” which burned down to read “Sold.”

Before the bonfire, locals put on a play that depicts the endless battle between nature and industry. At the start, narrators welcome “citizens and visitors to our magical town.” Then the Earth Dragon, who embodies “nature, deep earth, and everything wild,” fights Sir Hapless the Knight, who embodies “progress, technology, and the ways of civilized man.” Through various plot twists, the play eventually ends with the Grump being dragged down the street and burned in order to assure the town of new life in the spring.

On account of the pandemic, there was no Vinotok bonfire this year or last. Still, the festival’s origin story seems to serve as a parable for the challenges facing Crested Butte and how the town aspires to rise to them: a close-knit community, besieged by ongoing threats of exploitation, rallying together to burn a symbol of technocratic greed.

Yet when it comes to solving the real-world problems the Grump represents, the town appears to be less decisive. At the local elections on November 2, the citizens of Crested Butte voted against the empty-home tax and the increase in sales tax that would have provided the lion’s share of funding for future housing initiatives. (The noncontroversial increase to the vacation-rental tax passed easily.) The number of people who voted “no” on the empty home tax represented 57 percent of the 792 votes cast. And for all the impassioned dialogue about housing this summer, 46 percent of the registered voters in Crested Butte didn’t vote on the measure at all.

By chance timing, the day before the election, Will Dujardin left Crested Butte. He’d had a busy fall, traveling to Utah for his new job, planning his wedding, going elk hunting with his brother. By the time November 1 rolled around, Dujardin had said many goodbyes. His final day in Crested Butte was spent running errands and packing the U-Haul.

When I call him on November 3, he answers from his new home outside Salt Lake City, surrounded by an “explosion” of his belongings. “I’m a little disappointed,” he says of the election result, reminding me that the majority of the town council supported the empty-home tax. “I think it just didn’t pass enough of the actual voting electorate’s sniff test.”

Letters printed in the *Crested Butte News* days before the election provide some insight into why. Some citizens, like Shaun Horne, a candidate for town council, were concerned about alienating second-home owners, who they saw as community members. “We need a source of revenue that doesn’t hurt feelings,” Horne wrote. In a separate letter, Horne also wrote of second-home owners, “They will help generate employee housing, if asked nicely.” Mark Reaman, editor of the *Crested Butte News*, also advocated against the tax for similar reasons, writing: “My adult children today remain friends with some of the second-home-owner kids that would come in the summer.” Reaman proposed a different version of the tax that would shift more burden to locals. At least one letter, however, suggested that not everyone fully understood the

ballot measure. “How about exemptions or incentives for property owners who own and rent long-term to locals...?” wrote a business owner. In fact, second-home owners would be exempt from the \$2,500 fee if they rented the home for six months.

“Something I kept thinking about is that we’re putting a certain group of people’s feelings over making an actual difference in keeping the fabric of our community together and avoiding an exodus of labor,” says Dujardin. He speaks to a sentiment I heard from a few sources: everyone says they want worker housing, but when it comes time to do what it takes, like raise taxes or build high-density apartment buildings in their neighborhoods, people balk.

Another major problem, Dujardin says, is that locals who might support affordable housing have been increasingly pushed out of town or into places like Crested Butte South, an unincorporated area where residents are ineligible to vote on city matters. He’s lost several housing allies on town council this way. “So the people who can stay in town”—and vote or serve on council—“are the ones that are privileged enough to do so,” he says.

Yet there were small wins, he points out, like the increase in the vacation-rental tax. And he’s happy with the newly elected council, which is progressive. “I think there’s still hope to get something like this passed again.”

Toward the end of our call, he asks casually, “So what’s your take on the initiative not making it—how does this play out in your story?”

Caught off guard, I stammer something about how it’s disappointing, but like him, I hope the town finds a solution in the future. I offer that even if this story doesn’t have a happy ending, maybe it has a hopeful one.

He laughs. “Yeah, right? I think that, too, and I think a lot of people do. But I also talk to plenty of friends who are like, ‘Nope, ship’s sailed. Thanks for trying.’ I think it’s necessary to mix in reality with the optimism. But the status quo is why we’re in this shit. And people aren’t able to unlearn that. Anyway, hopefully they do, right?” A few minutes later, he excuses himself. He’s got a lot of boxes to unpack.

Filed to:

- [Aspen](#)
- [Colorado](#)
- [Crested Butte](#)

- Jackson
- Long Reads
- Politics
- Skiing