

WHISTLER BLOG POST Case Study

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Wedgemount Lake, British Columbia

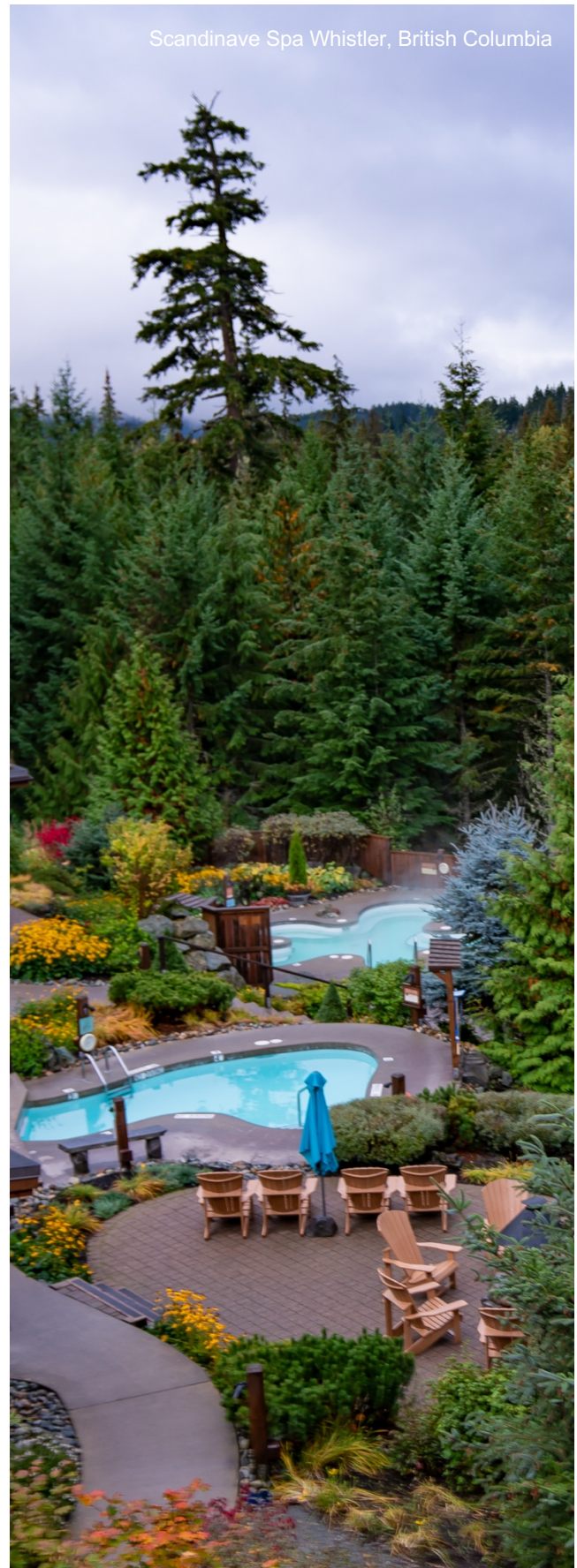


DEVELOPING A BC GEM:

THE EVOLUTION OF WHISTLER FROM WILDERNESS TO WORLD-RENOWNED RESORT

Over the past 50 years, the development of Whistler, BC—which sits on the shared, unceded territories of the Lilwat7úl (Lil'wat) and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nations—has been vast, bringing with it much change and growth for community residents. From its humble beginnings as a tiny community alongside Alta Lake, to its continued accolades as one of the world's best ski resorts, much can be learned by exploring the destination development principles that led to Whistler's success.

We will examine the history of the resort, with perspective from a few residents who were instrumental in Whistler's journey. The ways in which the resort was developed, and the principles that contributed to this development, will be interwoven throughout the sections that follow, providing other destinations with the opportunity to consider how they might apply these principles in their own communities. We will also address the emerging challenges facing Whistler today, in the context of what came before and how destination development principles such as community involvement may help resolve these issues.





Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, British Columbia

A BRIEF HISTORY:

SHARED TERRITORIES AND OLYMPIC DREAMS

For thousands of years, the area known today as Whistler has been the Shared Territories of the Lilwat7úl (Lil'wat) and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) First Nations, with the Lil'wat people living to the north and the Squamish people living to the south, along the coast.

According to the Skwxwú7mesh Lil'wat7ul Cultural Centre (SLCC) website, the two Nations shared a village, Spo7ez, at what is now Function Junction, but after the Black Tusk volcano erupted and buried the village in debris, they shifted to seasonal camps.

“Our families came into Whistler during the warmer months to harvest the flora and fauna for food and medicines. They would also go hunting and set up traps for the different animals that live here,” the website states.

European and American trappers and prospectors started to arrive in the region in the late 1800s. Seeing the fog and cloud which rolled around Whistler Mountain, the British named it London Mountain, while the main community in the area became known as Summit Lake.

These new settlers brought with them disease that devastated the Lil'wat and Squamish communities. This loss of life was then compounded by colonial policies and practices, such as the Indian Act and residential schools, which sought to control the Indigenous Peoples and strip them of their lands, rights, resources, cultures, and traditions—as new settlers continued to move to Canada.

Texan trapper, John Millar was among the first American settlers to move into the Whistler area and invited Alex and Myrtle Philip to visit him in his stopping house near today's Function Junction, which they did several times over the next few years. In the 1910s, the community of Summit Lake was renamed Alta Lake and in 1914, the Philips opened a fishing resort there, named Rainbow Lodge. Around this time, access to the community improved thanks to the Pacific Great Eastern Railway, which shortened the journey from Vancouver.

During the years that followed, the Philips expanded Rainbow Lodge, which Whistler Museum notes became "the most popular tourist resort west of Banff." By the 1940s, Rainbow Lodge was "the most popular honeymoon spot west of the Rockies and the tiny community of Alta Lake was lively and sociable throughout the mid-century, despite being accessible only by rail or float plane," according to the Resort Municipality of Whistler website.

From the establishment of Rainbow Lodge through to the 1950s, many more lodges and cabins were built, catering to locals and travellers visiting during the summer, primarily for fishing. It was in the 1960s that the first inkling of what would become the Whistler we know today appeared.

Franz Wilhelmsen and Garry Watson were among a group of businessmen from Vancouver who worked together to submit a bid for the 1968 Olympic Winter Games. Though the bid was unsuccessful, Wilhelmsen and a group of Vancouver investors went on to form the Garibaldi Lift Company in 1966, a ski development on London Mountain, which they renamed Whistler Mountain after the sound made by the hoary marmots that lived on the mountain. It was this ski area that planted the seed for transforming the mountain into a world-class destination.



DEVELOPING WHISTLER:

THE EMERGENCE OF A WORLD-CLASS SKI RESORT



Whistler, British Columbia

The Beginning of an Experience

“In the early ‘60s, most Easterners skied in Europe and Colorado, but not many came out west. It was a major shift to get them thinking about Western Canada,” says Al Raine, a renowned former coach and program director for the Canadian Alpine Ski team. Raine was instrumental in Whistler’s early days of development.

“If you look back to the ‘70s when it all got started, the ability to attract tourists to a potential ski resort in BC was pretty daunting...there was a little history of skiing in Banff, but not on the West Coast,” says Nancy Greene Raine. Voted Canada’s Female Athlete of the 20th Century thanks to her decorated career as an Alpine skier and Olympian, Greene Raine worked alongside her husband, Al. “[At the time] Whistler didn’t really have any tourism accommodations; it was basically a ski area for the keen skiers from Vancouver.”

She says Whistler’s location was critical to its development—the fact it was only a two-hour drive from Vancouver offered an opportunity other ski resorts in the province didn’t have. She adds that, “it was close to an urban population that could support it during the development stages, acting as the bread and butter, with the slower developing national and international markets as the gravy.”

Creating Policies to Support Development and Tourism



Drew Meredith, who moved to the area in the early '70s and was elected Mayor of the [Resort Municipality of Whistler](#) in 1986, notes that the Vancouver development community flocked to Whistler in those early days, purchasing real estate and developing as they saw fit. He adds that it was area residents who reached out to the provincial government in the early days to help control the “unregulated development, [that was] all over the map with very few good planning principles.”

In the fall of 1975, the provincial government instituted a land freeze and conducted a development study, which led to the incorporation of the municipality through the [Resort Municipality of Whistler \(RMOW\) Act](#); it was the first municipality of its kind to be established in Canada. This land-use planning was a critical best practice for the destination.

“The Province put a mega-development plan together and recommended we establish local government,” says Raine. “I went to work for the province at the time, putting a ski policy together and suggested to the provincial planners that their plan needed changes to make the proposed village a smaller scale pedestrian village with as much local ownership as possible.”

“Garry Watson and Al Raine—who were elected and appointed by the Province, respectively, to the original municipal council—were both pivotal in the planning of the resort,” adds Meredith. “Al had the experience of the European resorts, what they felt like, and how they worked, and Garry had the legal side—they could take on the Province and the federal government to convince them that this experiment was a good idea, and they did an incredible job.”

This community-led guidance, from engaged residents, was instrumental in Whistler’s early days and a noted destination development best practice — without collaboration amongst residents and government, it would have been impossible to achieve the level of success seen in Whistler.

Marketing the Destination



Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, British Columbia

In 1978, as noted on the Whistler Museum website, the Whistler Village Land Company (WVLC) was incorporated as a non-profit arm of the municipality, overseeing the sale and development of Whistler Village. The following year, the RMOW Act was amended so the [Whistler Resort Association](#) (WRA) could be established to market and promote the resort.

The establishment of the WRA included the introduction of [mandatory membership assessment fees](#) for owners of accommodation and commercial properties on designated Resort Land. These funds were then used by the WRA for its sales and marketing activities, in addition to the Hotel Room Tax instituted by the Province in the early '70s, which eventually evolved into the [Municipal & Regional District Tax \(MRDT\) program](#).

“Enshrined in the RMOW Act is legislation that empowers the Whistler Resort Association, a.k.a. Tourism Whistler, to tax all commercial members, there is no way you don't pay this tax...people hated it in the early years, but over time they appreciated that it was a pretty good thing,” he says.

Having a Destination Marketing Organization collecting funds, including membership fees and MRDT, which are used effectively to market and promote the destination was another best practice in the resort's development. Tourism Whistler's contributions to the community during its initial development cannot be overstated, as they furthered the destination's long-term economic success, and provided many benefits for both guests and residents.

“The bottom line is that they [residents] are there because of the tourists,” says Meredith. “Community involvement has always been extremely high—it was originally about getting the resort off the ground and making it work or the community wouldn't survive.”

Collaborating for Success

Longhorn Saloon, British Columbia



Collaboration with all levels of government is integral to successful destination development, and it's evident that Whistler applied this principle effectively throughout its journey.

Though similar structures were found in US ski resorts, the RMOW, WVLC, and WRA were unique concepts in the BC market at the time, and Meredith notes that “the resort could have gone a completely different direction had it not been for the strong guidance in the early days.”

Once the RMOW and local government were established, Mayor and Council worked strategically with the provincial and federal governments to help shape tourism in the area. Meredith adds that government subsidy was also significant in bringing Whistler Village to life. This subsidy included funds from the Travel Industry Development Subsidiary Agreement contributing to the original project budget.

“When AI was working with the Province, he was also negotiating with the federal government to [get them to] contribute funding for a sewer system,” says Greene Raine. She explains that in the process, it was Trevor Roote chair of the Advisory Parks and Recreation Commission (ARPC) in the region, who put the plan forward to have a biking/walking trail on top of the sewer line, which became the Valley Trail.

“Trevor was amazing, he went to all the landowners to get permission and there was a referendum to raise the money for the trail. Even back in the ‘70s and early ‘80s, there was this kind of community involvement.”

Shortly after the RMOW was incorporated, the Province made a public proposal call for development of nearby Blackcomb Mountain. Hugh Smythe, who started out as a volunteer ski patroller at Whistler in the mid ‘60s when he was just 18 years old, was part of a development group that submitted a successful bid and is credited as a pivotal player in the resort’s expansion. By the end of 1980, Whistler Village, Blackcomb Mountain and the Whistler Northside lifts were open, though the build out of the village, planned in stages, was still in its infancy.

Collaboration amongst those in the business community was important in building up the destination, too. “During the mid-to-late 1980s, there were two strong mountain operations [Whistler and Blackcomb] that were in competition with each other,” says Greene Raine. “There was a lot of marketing one against the other. But when it was time to go to Ontario, Québec and other markets [to attract guests], everyone pulled together and worked as Whistler Resort.”

Planning for an Exceptional Visitor Experience

Whistler, British Columbia



The original designs for Whistler Village were crafted by local Vancouver architects—however, Raine was not sold on the initial village design. He travelled with the Whistler planning team to visit Vail, Colorado and sought input from renowned American architect, Eldon Beck, who had designed the plans for Vail. Raine invited Beck to Whistler, where the architect carefully created a new design plan, incorporating the natural elements of the surrounding mountains and forest.

A 2022 article by Pique News Magazine states that Beck's design "was intended to feel connected to nature, with the [village] stroll set out to create a natural flow of people, encouraging people to slow down and spend time with one another." Taking the landscape, its strength and beauty, and incorporating that into the guest experience in the village contributed to its success.

"The development in the village was also subject to strict design controls and restrictions, which meant all construction adhered to the original design elements and consistency was achieved in the village—Meredith describes it as "a walkable city with shops on the ground floor and people living above," complete with underground parking.

Controlling Development and Managing Capacity

Whistler, British Columbia



This design and development control, combined with the thorough planning and investment mentioned earlier, contributed significantly to Whistler's accomplishments.

"Development rights weren't automatic, they were given to people who did something for the community, that provided exceptional community benefit, like a ski lift, or in the case of summer development, which occurred in the late '80s, golf courses," says Meredith. "The Nicklaus North Golf Course and the Chateau Whistler Golf Course were both created with development incentives—you build the golf course, we'll let you build housing around it."

As part of the development and the Official Community Plan (OCP), RMOW council also put a cap on accommodations, by imposing a limit on bed units. Initially, this only considered guest beds, but now includes residential housing too.

"They said, if there's to be 30,000 skiers on the mountain—where they got that number from, believe me, it's just nuts, but today, Whistler and Blackcomb are doing 30,000 skiers per day—and there's one non-skier for every three skiers, let's build a town that's capable of holding 40,000 people, which therefore created a cap on development," notes Meredith.

"It's an interesting concept that I don't think has been done many other places...there's about 62,000 bed units currently approved in Whistler today, so there has been some pretty good creep, but the principle behind the cap is still alive."

Much of this increase in the number of bed units permitted in Whistler has been to account for the rising need for employee accommodation.

Surviving Adversity through Collaboration



Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, British Columbia

While Whistler's development journey thus far sounds like a breeze, that is far from the truth. Just as Whistler Village was set to boom, economic forces halted its progress.

"Interest rates soared [in the early '80s] and a number of projects that were underway crumbled," notes Raine. "By that time, about a third of the initial village was already under construction—it was very lucky the economic collapse didn't happen a year sooner."

"The basic good principles had been laid and it was very hard to deviate from that," adds Meredith. "It was a good concept that everyone could buy into and so it actually moved forward pursuant to the original plan."

Again, it was support from the provincial government that kept Whistler afloat during the tumultuous '80s—WVLC was acquired by a new Crown corporation, Whistler Land Company Developments, which then oversaw the eventual completion of Whistler Village. This included changing the originally planned Resort Centre—to be filled with community amenities like an ice rink, pool and more—into a conference centre.

Expanding Offerings and Event Hosting Capabilities



Whistler, British Columbia

A critical component of successful destination development is enhancing visitor experiences and infrastructure, so guests want to return again and again. The conference centre was a key piece of infrastructure and its completion in the summer of 1985 proved invaluable the following year.

When Vancouver hosted Expo '86, it catapulted Whistler onto the world stage. As noted in *Pique Magazine*, the limited accommodations available in Vancouver because of Expo '86 meant that many organizations held their conferences in Whistler, providing an opportunity for the resort to highlight its offerings, including summer activities. When Drew Meredith was elected Mayor in 1986, he worked to further the summer development of the destination.

While Raine notes that a golf course and valley trails were negotiated and underway at the same time as the village, Meredith asserts that the “concept of a four-season resort wasn’t at the top of the list in 1975.” He adds further that summer development in the late '80s included the addition of two golf courses and the expansion of trails, eventually allowing people to travel from one end of Whistler to the other on mostly paved trails.

“[This was a] huge best practice, because it’s a very cheap amenity to put in, but it has amazing benefits to the community and it’s great for tourism as well,” Meredith states.

Incorporating authentic Indigenous experiences

As Canada moves towards rectifying its relationship with the Indigenous Peoples through a process of truth and reconciliation, so too has the Resort Municipality of Whistler. In 1997, the RMOW consulted with the Lil'wat Nation about opportunities to participate in the community. As shared caretakers of the land, the Lil'wat Nation met with the Squamish Nation to discuss their joint participation and in 1999, they formalized their relationship through the Protocol Agreement.

As a result, in 2008, the Squamish and Lil'wat Nations opened a world-class cultural centre in Whistler—the first of its kind in Canada, according to the Tourism Whistler website. The Sk̓wxwú7mesh Liłwat7ul Cultural Centre (SLCC) embodies the spirit of partnership between the two First Nations and provides meaningful experiences celebrating Lil'wat and Squamish cultures and ways, practised here since time immemorial.

Since then, the RMOW has undertaken educational initiatives to ensure businesses and municipal staff appreciate the significance of living and working on the Shared Territories—and enable ongoing opportunities for listening, learning, and action on truth and reconciliation.



Whistler, British Columbia



A myriad of achievements in recent decades

Since the 1990s, there were many other exciting developments for Whistler, including several that furthered infrastructure and enhanced the experience for residents and guests:

- Being voted the Number One Ski Resort in North America by Snow Country Magazine in the early '90s, the first of many accolades
- Extending the original village to provide expanded services and amenities for residents
- Amalgamating the two competing resorts to become Whistler Blackcomb in the late '90s, with the Whistler Mountain Bike Park opening the following year
- Winning the bid to host the 2010 Winter Olympics
- Being declared “one of the most liveable communities in the world” in 2005
- Opening the world record-breaking Peak 2 Peak Gondola in December 2008
- Receiving additional funding in direct support of tourism through the Province’s Resort Municipality Initiative (RMI).
- Receiving significant investments for lifts and gondola upgrades after the resort was purchased by Vail Resorts, Inc. in 2016.
- Opening the Cloudraker Skybridge in 2018.

Measuring quality of life to inform destination development

In 2006, the RMOW began an annual Community Life Survey, which allows residents to provide input on community priorities and give feedback on municipal plans and services.

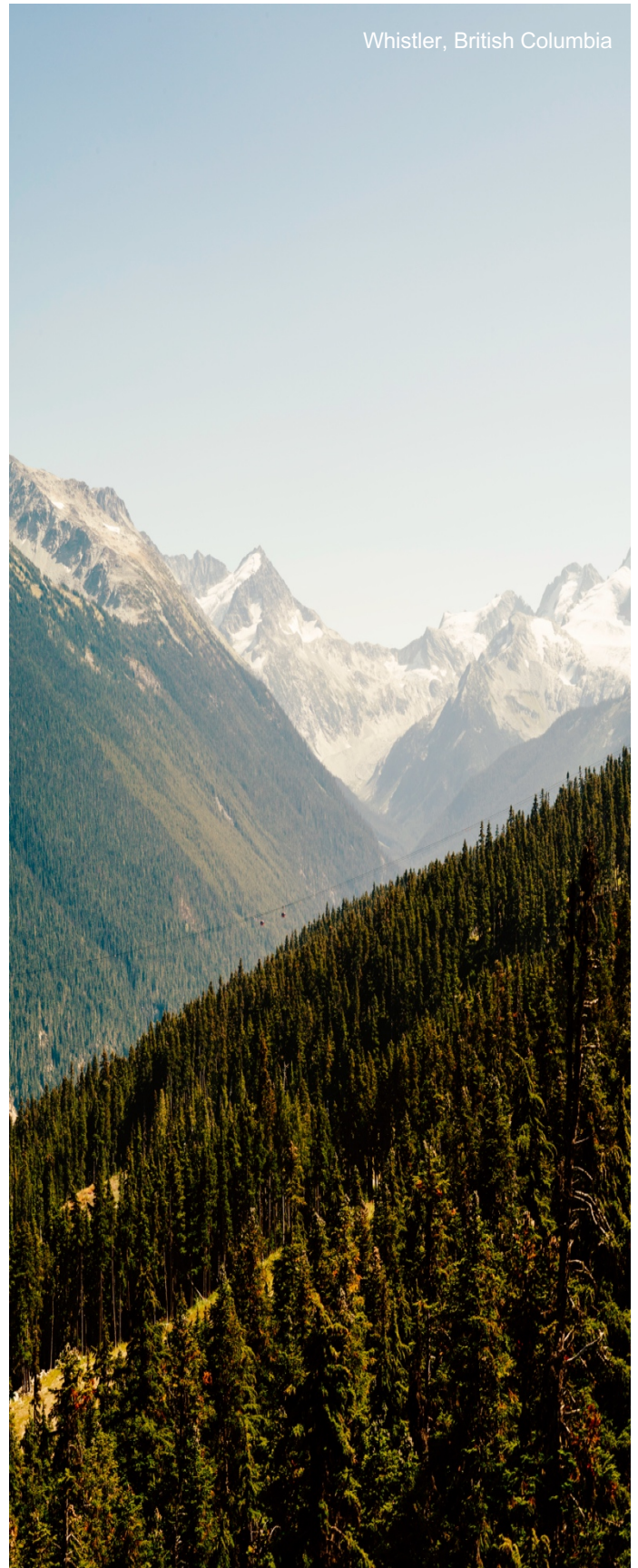
“The community calls the shots today and their happiness is measured annually,” says Meredith. “It’s a big deal in terms of making sure they are happy and have the facilities they want and housing.”

As noted on the RMOW website, the survey provides the municipality with the opportunity to measure community sentiment, gain feedback, and measure trends, all of which help to inform future decisions and planning.

While, the 2023 survey has been completed, results are not yet available. However, in 2022, 84% of permanent residents and 91% of second homeowners were satisfied with Whistlers as a place to live.

All these results and other measures of municipal goals and objectives can be found on the [Community Monitoring Dashboard](#), a public data portal launched by the RMOW in 2023 to increase transparency.

Whistler, British Columbia



MANAGING TODAY'S CHALLENGES

Whistler, British Columbia

As of 2021, almost 14,000 people live in Whistler permanently, with more than 3 million guests welcomed to the community each year. While destination development best practices have got Whistler a long way, there is still more work to be done as resort municipality deals with the effects of the global pandemic and an array of economic, environmental and cultural shifts.

Whistler's rapid growth in popularity in recent years—along with restrictions to Canada's temporary foreign worker program—has exacerbated staff shortages. Likewise, policies which previously successfully shaped development are now contributing to a lack of affordable housing for tourism and hospitality workers. Many destinations across the country have struggled with similar problems, which have been further compounded by the pandemic.

The community is working to address these challenges.

In 2019, in response to concerns about overtourism, Tourism Whistler conducted a place branding exercise to develop a "collective tourism vision for Whistler." Engaging with Whistler's residents and business community through interviews and surveys, Tourism Whistler developed its Place Brand Platform, reflecting the destination's unique place and personality, and identifying "Whistler's Best Guest," guiding the organization's focus for its marketing campaigns.

According to the RMOW website, funds generated by the Municipal & Regional District Tax and Resort Municipality Initiative were expected to total \$20 million in 2023, about half of which would be diverted towards employee housing in Budget 2024.

A recent article published in early 2024 notes that business sentiment and staffing levels have improved, thanks to COVID-19 restrictions being removed, and that a joint international recruitment campaign by Tourism Whistler and the Whistler Chamber of Commerce helped get more than 70% of area businesses fully staffed by winter 2023-24.

Further to the place branding exercise, Tourism Whistler is in the process of developing a long-term Tourism Vision & Strategy, which they note "provides the framework for a sustainable tourism plan that aligns with the interests and values of local residents and guests, while working to balance year-round visitor volumes."

Whistler, British Columbia



A BRIEF LOOK AHEAD

In June 2020, [the RMOW's Official Community Plan](#) updates were adopted, creating a foundational document for the community's future growth. Since then, the RMOW has been working to engage residents through virtual town halls, working groups and its "Whistler Sessions" Scenarios, which hypothesize ways in which Whistler's future may unfold between now and 2050.

This community engagement helped to inform [RMOW's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#), which identifies Smart Tourism as one of its Strategic Priorities, focused on preserving and protecting "Whistler's unique culture, natural assets and infrastructure." Towards the end of 2023, RMOW set out to begin its Smart Tourism visioning journey, intended to "guide Whistler's collaborative approach to destination management and stewardship."

The municipality's acknowledgement of the key role tourism plays in the community's success, and its collaborative relationship with tourism stakeholders and residents, is an ongoing best practice.

Looking ahead, Whistler—and many destinations across the country—will continue to face challenges, including the rising cost of living and doing business, and the effects of climate change. However, through decades of destination development best practices, the foundation Whistler has built will contribute to its resilience and ultimate success for many years to come.