April 8, 2025

Larimer County Commissioners
200 West Oak, Suite 2200
Fort Collins, CO 80521

Copy to:
Estes Park Board of Trustees
170 MacGregor Ave., Estes Park, CO 80517

RE: Response to Kirby Hazelton's April 1, 2025 Letter to the Larimer County Commissioners Regarding Visit Estes Park Governance

Dear Commissioners Stephens, Kefalas and Shadduck-McNally,

As the duly appointed Board of Directors of Visit Estes Park (VEP), we are writing to address concerns raised in Estes Park Trustee Hazelton's recent letter dated April 1, 2025. We respect her right to voice her perspective as an elected official appointed to the VEP Board, but we must correct several statements and provide critical context to prevent misinformation from guiding decisions about the future of our community's tourism. We understand that Trustee Hazelton plans to share her concerns with the Estes Park Board of Trustees at this evening's scheduled meeting.

Trustee Hazelton did not share her most recent concerns, or her intention to so petition the Town Board and County commissioners, with the Board Chair or any other Board Member with the Visit Estes Park Board. This is another signal that the working relationship with Trustee Hazelton has with the VEP Board continues to deteriorate. The VEP Board has been concerned about Trustee Hazelton's appointment to the Visit Estes Park Board since her appointment in April 2024.

This appointment followed a highly contentious vote that overrode Estes Park's newly elected mayor's original nominee. There was discussion during these deliberations that Trustee Hazelton had a personal history with the organization which included her unsuccessful bid to become CEO of Visit Estes Park in 2018. This history is not speculation—it is well-documented in public records, board meetings, and social media. Local press accounts at the time gave significant coverage of this controversy and its outcome. Mike Romero, in an editorial for the Estes Park Trail Gazette, April 8, 2024 headlined ***Really, In the first meeting of the new town board?*** Dawn Wilson, writing for the Estes Park Trail Gazette, published a letter on August 19, 2024 headlined "***A loss for Estes, a gain for Florida; VEP interim CEO announced***"

Trustee Hazelton has shown a persistent pattern of undermining the organization's board leadership. The VEP Board has worked in a constructive and collaborative way with multiple appointed Estes Park Trustees. While there were sometimes matters in which we had disagreement, in all cases discussions were respectful and supportive of the organization, the board and staff. Sadly, this is not the case during Trustee Hazelton's tenure. Disagreement and debate are healthy aspects of governance—dysfunction arises only when a single member refuses to accept the outcome of majority rule. Personal agendas must not become the basis for destabilizing a vital economic driver for the Estes Valley.

Ms. Hazelton's letter accuses the VEP Board of dysfunction, mismanagement, and lack of transparency. These claims are baseless and do not reflect the view of the board majority. The VEP Board members are well-respected stakeholders in the tourism community in Estes Park. Visit Estes Park has been publicly praised by Destination International as a model for transparency. Our financials, strategy documents, and board actions are publicly available and proactively shared. The Board is operationally sound.

The timing of the April 1st letter closely follows the VEP Board vote of March 25th in which Trustee Hazelton's was the only dissenting vote. The conclusions reached by Trustee Hazelton in the April 1st letter are highly subjective and based on selective inputs that convey an inaccurate and incomplete picture of the organization to the County Commissioners and our Town Trustees. This is extremely regrettable, particularly

as our recruitment process is still open and interested candidates regularly research information pertinent to the organization and community. Trustee Hazelton is aware of this.

Last fall, Visit Estes Park engaged a reputable, industry-leading executive search firm, SearchWide Global, to manage the critical process of hiring a new CEO. A marketing district CEO recruitment is time consuming, complex and the VEP recruitment had been expected to be completed in March 2025. Due to highly unusual developments that occurred just as deliberations were about to begin, the search was paused. No board or committee member was responsible for the disruption caused by the now unsubstantiated allegations made. SearchWide Global has performed its obligations in an exemplary way and has continued to partner with VEP to address the public facing damage in the industry. The VEP Board sought legal advice from the organization's counsel and recommendations from our recruitment partner. The Board then participated in significant discussion and deliberation. As a Board member, Trustee Hazelton took part in these discussions.

Accusations of financial mismanagement or impropriety surrounding the recruitment process are completely unfounded. It is critical for the organization to be deliberate and thorough, with a final CEO hiring decision made with high confidence. This ensures we select a leader who meets both professional standards and community expectations. The candidate who was the victim of the accusations withdrew. SearchWide Global agreed to extend its contract deadlines to allow the time to investigate the allegations and kept the posting open.

With the approval of the Board, the investigation began. While the allegations were determined to be largely unfounded, information was uncovered of other issues of concern. The VEP Board is proactively working to address these concerns. All board members, including Trustee Hazelton, received a briefing on the investigation's confidential report from our organization's counsel in executive session. Trustee Hazelton knows the issues are more complex and multilayered than her recent communication conveyed. Over 35% of Visit Estes Park's annual budget is invested in staff compensation and benefits. It is absolutely the responsibility of the VEP Board to make sure that our board and staff are performing to the best of their abilities and are focused on the strategic goals of the organization in service to our communities.

Once the investigation concluded, the search committee determined unanimously that the outcome of this first attempt was unequivocally impacted and rendered ineffective. The recommendations made by the appointed search committee were discussed at the VEP Board Meeting on March 25th in executive session. Recommendations were also made by our recruitment partner. The conversation on March 25th was serious and lengthy, with only a few difficult options available to the board. In the open session that followed, the board concurred with the search committee by a vote of 6 to 1 to conclude the first search and resume the search at a later date. Trustee Hazelton was the only dissenting vote. Executive session discussions may not be discussed by Board members. Nor should they have been ignored by omission in Trustee Hazelton's April 1st letter.

There are other representations made in this communication that are not accurate or complete in context. We briefly address them here:

1) VEP Board members were advised that solicitations for industry consultants were being made by Chair Jurgens and Secretary Gibson. Both served on the search committee. These steps were recommended by our recruitment partner before a second search should be started. These options will be considered by the full VEP Board.
2) We agree that a board should speak with one voice, or not at all. Six members of the Board did speak with one voice, Trustee Hazelton is the exception.
3) Trustee Hazelton has made repeated, unfounded allegations before. They were fully responded to in written responses by the Board in August and September of 2024.
4) Trustee Hazelton made very recent requests for documentation that have either been provided to her or was referred to VEP counsel for clarification.
5) The Board specifically approved appointing a search committee to work with our recruitment partner to review candidates and to make recommendations to the Board. This committee

performed in an exemplary way, in a process professionally managed by our SearchWide Global, our recruitment partner.

6) The conclusions on Board interaction with the former CEO are in the past. These issues were addressed at the time. Trustee Hazelton has little firsthand knowledge of these events which preceded her appointment to the Board. Her public comments on this issue were addressed in a letter from the VEP Board Chair on August 13th.

Further:

7) Staffing decisions were executed legally and transparently, with outside legal counsel consulted. No hiring decisions violated contract terms or fiscal policy. VEP's contract with the CEO states that the executive can employ and discharge all staff, which is the industry norm.
8) The former CEO was evaluated through third-party 360 assessments and other means. All assessments were very positive.
9) The former CEO's renegotiated contract was well within industry norms and timelines, discussed in multiple meetings, and was fully compliant with board policy, and negotiated with legal counsel for VEP. The VEP Board fully supported the renegotiation.

The most troubling comments made in Trustee Hazelton's April 1st letter, and perhaps the crux of the issue, are the comments about staff discontent and culture concerns. This is a highly subjective conclusion from one board member based only on the opinions expressed by some staff members. If there is an example anywhere in her allegations of staff trying to usurp the duties and obligations of the VEP Board, it is here. Feedback from staff is mixed at best and by conveying only a partial view to the Town Board and County Commissioners, we believe Trustee Hazelton provides only self-selected input that supports her personal views.

The former CEO left VEP for another industry opportunity in a larger budgeted organization with a significant increase in compensation. Since she left, multiple key team members have resigned, some citing internal tensions between remaining senior-level staff, and concerns about developing workplace culture. Some of these staff were also concerned about recent toxicity on the board because of Trustee Hazelton's repeatedly sowing discord in the organization. These developments are serious, and the VEP Board acknowledges that a professional third-party assessment is warranted of the current staff culture, operations and board and community dynamics. Before any permanent CEO is hired, we are committed to conducting an analysis to ensure that any future leader steps into a healthy and productive organizational environment. These efforts must be thoughtful—not politicized or weaponized for personal agendas by board or staff members.

The alleged issues related to the former CEO have only recently arisen and are not shared by all the staff that worked with her. The Board is unaware of any documented complaints made by any staff member about the prior CEO during her tenure. During that time, the staff expressed only positive comments about her leadership, abilities and fairness. There was a video created by the same staff as she departed, that was made as a permanent tribute to her leadership. This Kara Franker Tribute Video shows a highly supportive staff and board at the conclusion of her tenure.

Concerns allegedly expressed by some staff have now apparently migrated to the VEP Board. We believe this is at least partly due to one coalition of staff who disagree on the outcome of the first recruitment. The hiring of the CEO does not lie with our staff at VEP, no matter how valued they are. The VEP Board is solely responsible for hiring decisions relating to a permanent CEO. Staff input was asked for and was considered among other factors. The Board chose a different course. Estes Park's economy relies on the strength and stability of Visit Estes Park. Its governance should not be held hostage by personal agendas. Ms. Hazelton's request to remove the current board—all of whom are respected community leaders and industry experts—would be deeply destabilizing and set a dangerous precedent.

The issues at hand involve complex and confidential employment issues. This will take substantial expertise. It cannot be addressed by one board member or any volunteer board. Substantial experience in managing and inspiring talented people, board, government and community dynamics are essential. We believe that our organization and its contributions to our community are worth the investment as we enter a challenging market on the downside and exciting opportunities on the upside.

VEP needs to recruit the strongest possible candidate for VEP to lead the organization, now more than ever. We have significant opportunities that are potentially available to us through Sundance relocating to Boulder. We are also facing major headwinds from staffing issues at RMNP, the likelihood that foreign workers may not be available to local hospitality businesses, funding challenges that may arise under the new administration in Washington, and an economic downturn that we are warned will affect the tourism industry in the coming months. This needs to be the focus of our Board, our organization and our staff.

VEP's recruitment opportunities are now disadvantaged because the first search was so disrupted. This is why our recruitment partner counseled that the search be paused while public steps are taken with a highly skilled and respected consultant in this industry. Four highly regarded consultants were contacted. Two were interested in submitting proposals. Having either of these consultants, who are experienced and respected in this industry involved will be a key factor for the strongest candidates to consider applying for our permanent CEO position when the recruitment resumes.

Our recruitment partner will continue their services under the original terms of its contract with the district. An added perception of controversy involving the VEP Board, the Estes Park Town Board and the County Commissioners will further hamper our continued recruitment. This is not a subjective conclusion, but is the guidance provided by our recruitment partner, the premier recruiter in this industry. The current very experienced Board has many decades of experience in leadership in lodging, food and beverage and retail. All have experience in marketing and the management and recruitment of staff in their own businesses and occupations. Some have prior board experience. We are uniquely qualified to work with our recruitment and consulting partners to complete this recruitment effectively in service to our organization and community.

We are all responsible for and taking ownership of the effective operations of the Local Marketing District to support its mission on behalf of our shared communities. Since 2016, sales tax receipts to the Town of Estes Park have increased by nearly 68%, with growing receipts in our winter and shoulder seasons. The biggest jump in sustained receipts started in 2021. In 2024, approximately 82% of the Town's sales tax receipts came from tourism activities. With the advent of 6E funding, almost $11,440,000 from lodging customers has been contributed towards workforce housing and childcare needs.

As a Board, we believe that we have accomplished much in governing this organization over the past several years, most especially our efforts on 6e. The Board is *of our community* and are engaged, responsive and is attentive to fellow community members and organizations. There is a depth of multifaceted experience in hospitality and lived experience in Estes Park, some multigenerational, some for several decades and others that are more recent arrivals in Estes Park. Each of us has been willing to contribute their time generously to the furtherance of the community we love.

The Visit Estes Park Board remains committed to collaboration, transparency, and accountability. We hope to continue working with the Larimer County commissioners and the Estes Park Town Board to ensure the continued success of our destination and community.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Board of the Estes Park Local Marketing District,
Visit Estes Park.
Sean Jurgens, Chair