

David Page:

Welcome to panel three. I'm really excited about this one. We've got sort of, in my mind, coming from the Inyo National Forest where it seems like we have boundless backcountry skiing terrain and we can find all sorts of niches without people. We've got what I see as kind of the future of backcountry skiing here. We've got the Wasatch over on the far right here, and the Wasatch in the middle, Tahoe on the far right, and the Tetons here next to me. And we're gonna be talking broadly about, you know, in this new era where the numbers are exploding of backcountry skiers, and more and more of us are wanting to get out, and obviously we have the same number of trailheads generally, and those trailheads are getting more and more busy. How do we manage those people? How do we get them there, first of all, in a sustainable fashion? And how do we mitigate impacts, right? I mean, generally, I think from an equity standpoint, from an inclusivity standpoint, we're excited to have more people in our realm, because hopefully that translates into having more stewards. But that takes some education. And where do we do that education? And how do we get people to places without having to build more and more parking lots and gondolas and turning our backcountry into basically a big commercial resort. So these guys have been grappling with it on the ground so it should be a really good, exciting conversation.

I'm gonna give you guys just each couple minutes just introduce yourself please and your organization and where you live and then we'll come back around and talk about what you're each doing at the local level. So we'll start with you, Anthony.

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

Sure. Hey everyone, I'm Anthony Cupaiuolo. I'm the executive director of Tahoe Backcountry Alliance. That's a part-time role for me that I took on just under two years ago. In my other work, I run a digital media outfit, first tracks productions, and have been doing that for over 20 years in the Tahoe area. Prior to that, I worked as a political consultant in D.C. and in San Francisco, and went to graduate school for political management. So now, in my role at TBA, kind of some of that work that I had done 20 plus years ago is coming back into play, And it's good to see that the money I put into that wasn't completely wasted.

TBA is founded back in 2016. And our initial focus is really heavy on infrastructure and, in part, getting our local agencies aware of our existence. And you were touching on that later, that sometimes your transportation agencies, for us, it's Caltrans for a lot of the areas, or even Forest Service may not know of the user groups and where they are recreating. So, that came into play back in 2016 when we almost lost a big parking area for this area in the west shore called Jakes, which is a really popular zone for backcountry skiers and snowboarders. And it's evolved in the last seven or so years. You know, infrastructure is still a really big component of the work that we do. We're kind of expanding more into the equity side of access as well, so it's not just infrastructure and we have a program where we work with the Washoe Tribe and purchase about 50 pairs of skis for youth in the tribe and had some on snow days last year. And this year we're trying to build on that program and have a gear library to work with other disadvantaged kids groups. And we're gonna be talking today about one of the things that we're excited that we are a part of, it's microtransit. We're the only recreation-based microtransit in the

Tahoe region, which is unfortunate. We're hoping for a large scale expansion. It's much needed in our area. Our trailheads are very spread out. They're often congested. They're often not plowed adequately in the winter. So there's a need to get people to trailheads in a way other than traditionally in driving. And carpooling is super important and that's a big deal but if we can get people to trailheads, there is plenty of space up above. They're like, you know, once I start touring I get away from people and it's really not hard to do that. The hard part is sometimes just getting to the to the parking area. So that's one of the things we're gonna be talking about.

David Page:

Thanks. Cool. Thanks Anthony. Jade quick and true.

Jay Erickson:

Yeah, I'm Jay Erickson. I am with Wasatch Backcountry Alliance. I was recently elected vice president for the board. I live in Sandy, Utah just south of Salt Lake and And we are facing a unique problem where we're not just focused on back country users anymore and we have to tackle transportation for the entire ski industry of Utah, which right now is 1.2 million people annually. So we're trying to discuss socioeconomic equity and transportation equity solutions that solve the problem and kill the need for the gondola. And then we're working on other access issues for this topic. it's how do we how do we defeat the need for a gondola.

David Page:

Nice thanks Jay. Gary.

Gary Kofinas:

Gary Kofinas, I serve as chair of the Teton backcountry Alliance which is a volunteer kind of a retirement gig for me. I am a professor emeritus University Alaska Fairbanks a professor of natural resource policy which informs our work. our organization's four years old. We're almost all volunteer and I'll tell you a bit about what we're doing and some of the stuff that has to do with Teton Pass.

David Page:

Well while you got the mic up why don't you go ahead and start. Tell us what's going on on Teton Pass. What are the issues? What are you guys working on?

Gary Kofinas:

I'm curious how many of you have skied in the Tetons? How many of you skied Teton Pass? Well then those of you who didn't raise your hand well that this, I just want to point out that this picture's been photoshopped, that there's really nothing like that there. The snow is low quantity, very dense, heavy, and the avalanche danger is always extremely high, so if you haven't come you might want to rethink the idea of coming.

David Page:

Super inclusive here.

Gary Kofinas:

I think we all do that about our areas, right? We're going to talk a little bit about Teton Pass which is one of the most popular backcountry ski area in Wyoming and our region and one of the kind of nation destinations for great backcountry skiing. It's a spectacular access because you go from the west side Victor over to Wilson over 8,400 foot pass. It's a very important quarter for workforce transportation. We have 7,000 cars going across that every day, bringing the workforce to Jackson to have the jobs because people can't afford to live there. And there's also this wonderful Mount Glory, and that's on the north side, south side, lots of trailheads.

Our counter, and it presents all kinds of issues in terms of congestion and safety. We have counters at some of the trailheads, late November to January 1st, 11,000 people. That's at Teton, at just the Teton Pass, the very summit of the Teton Pass access areas. The top of the pass accommodates about 70 cars. We sometimes have as many as 10 cars waiting. The Teton Backcountry Alliance actually initiated because it concerns the people hiking up, kicking off avalanches that could come down and kill somebody who's driving to work.

And our issues have grown in terms of the kinds of things we're doing more and that more. To address the problems of congestion and the corridor and such, we submitted a federal lands access program grant FLAP, and if you guys don't know about those should look at them for your area, I don't know four million dollars, and we proposed all kinds of new infrastructure parking lots, not bigger parking lots but safer, more hitchhiking lanes, so on and so forth. We didn't get the money, but they said, "Oh, let's give you 300,000," and we're going to have the Federal Highway Commission do a Teton Pass Corridor Management Plan.

And that has just received it two days ago, the draft plan that's been in the works for two years. And it addresses a lot of infrastructure issues, parking lots, ride share lanes. But it also talks about potentially having parking, that's spring, that's not a busy day, by the way, pay to park like some of the Forest Service does, and a possible shuttle with the money from the pay for parking to go towards running the shuttle. One of the issues that I didn't mention is this area that we see as a parking lot, the Wyoming Department of Transportation sees this as a chain-up area. And they say, "Well, that's not really a parking lot. That's a chain-up area." And so it's made all kinds of conflicts between.

But we've developed a better relationship with YDOT and we're moving along. So my first glance at the draft corridor management plan is that they are recommending a Shuttle program, and I just want to talk about that briefly. We have been running an experimental shuttle program like once a month for the last couple winters, COVID we backed off a bit and it's been very well-subscribed. A lot of people using it in the one day and doing it. It's been free, and we've been exploring the idea of possibly running a shuttle from one end to the top of the pass or one of the trailheads on the other side and back and going to our local government to give us a vehicle, a microtransit vehicle, and to give us maintenance and let us run the operation inspired by the Wasatch guys who have a shuttle program that they're running.

But in addition to that, as Hillary mentioned, we have an ambassador program, 14 volunteers working there. We are running public events. There's responsible use, dog poop, avalanche safety, wildlife conflicts, preservation of wild lands that we're working on in the expansion of ski areas that Hillary will talk about. And I guess I'm not going to say a whole lot more, except I want to, for discussion of our group, and I hope everyone will participate, I want to talk about some of the dilemmas. You would think, "Oh, shuttle, that's a no-brainer," but I've been asking members of our community, what do you think of a shuttle? And they go through this kind of mental thing, and they say, "More people, you know, oh my God, more people." And then they go, "But maybe less carbon." And maybe people will be, you know, be, have incentive to park down low and come up for the day. But, you know, Teton passes kind of place out. I'm looking at it all day working on my computer and then I go, "Oh, it's three o'clock, I go up climb up glory come down I'm home at five, five fifteen or so, so how does a shuttle accommodate that kind of activity and so it's the balance between less carbon, easier access, more people.

Ultimately I think just to close the Teton Backcountry Alliance is really focusing on is trying to get people to focus less on stoke and more on respect stewardship and highlighting this human ecological relationship and to have an understanding of this place. I think we have been successful in culture change, fewer people are hiking up glory you can finish it with the last one, fewer people are hiking up glory in considerable conditions and skiing the center-punching Glory Bowl, and so with that, hopefully that'll stimulate some conversation.

David Page:

Great, thanks Gary. Jay, 11,000 skiers a day sound pretty good to you.

Jay Erikson:

Sounds about right. I think it's actually a lot higher because the gondola is supposed to move 5,000 a day and that's half the demand for one canyon. So yeah, Wasatch Backcountry Alliance, we're an all volunteer board. We're hiring our first ED so we can start tackling some new things.

I'm pretty sure most people in the room have heard about the Gondola issue we're facing and the phased approach. So phase one, which we love, is buses, tolling, and mobility hubs, mobility hubs will be the center focus of this. Phase two is avalanche sheds, which were potentially in favor of two of them which could reduce the avalanche closures by 86% per UDOT, and then gondola is phase three and we want to kill it. And it's a 1.4 billion dollar infrastructure project that per UDOT is to prevent the canning vehicles for 56 hours a year.

So it's been shocking because when it really comes down to it, it's we have agreed and we have a self-entitlement issue, people want other people to take public transit so they can drive and corporations want to suck every dollar out of every tourist and every local that they can so I don't want to focus on why the gondola doesn't make sense. I want to focus on actual solutions moving forward. So how many people in the room have heard of mobility hubs? Very few. So

mobility hubs is transforming the way we look at transportation. So instead of going to a park and ride and sitting at a bus stop that's miserable and just hoping that a bus comes, it is turning an area in your town into a destination, a community center. So you would have a gear room, a bike shop, like together you'd have coffee you'd have like a Walgreens or somewhere simple that you could run errands. You know, doggie daycare. No dogs in the wasp and like no dogs in our wilderness area. It's all watershed. You drop your dog off. You drop your kid off, you know, just go rip her a couple hours.

The goal is to move the consolidation point away from the mouth of the canyon. You know, get people in consolidated cars and vans. We want year-round affordable transportation like your comment about what people are doing with the Spanish community. This is something we're proud of because we want transportation equity, which means your background does not dictate your mountain access. So, if you put mobility hubs connected to current infrastructure and you have them, you can adapt them and you can expand them or you can add new ones.

50% of our growth is west of I-15, which is currently no possible public transit that makes sense to get to any of the ski buses. So instead, we can just add mobility hubs in population density areas. And this allows us to have an area that we want to be at. And that's the big difference.

Our goal is not to have people who can't afford to go to the resort take the bus. Our goal is when rich tourists come and they stay at a hotel they take the bus because it's the most effective solution. We don't want to have people priced out with the tolling and the gondola. For a family, if you took the gondola, it'd be like a hundred dollars for a family of four. And if you have tolling and had to have a parking reservation and were a householder, it'd be fifty dollars a car.

Whereas our governor has said that he would like to have the ski buses compensated by taxes and some of the economic development. In each mobility hub, you can have small businesses, and then the mayors can come and be heroes for once and not break all of our trust in government by coming out and saying, "We're gonna develop an area for my constituents and create an economic hub that allows for year-round mountain transit. The gondola only is winter transit, and right now we have no summer transit. I'm not sure Chelsea is, but she's probably can speak on some of the numbers.

We have some trailhead crowding, would you say?

Audience:

Yeah, for sure.

Jay Erikson:

And like we have a year-round problem. It's not a winter-only problem. We're going into leaf season and people are crazy. It is reckless because they're not people that are like used to being in the mountains, right? Oh, I can park here. It doesn't matter. I'm like, mm-hmm. Huge no parking sign, actually. Yeah, we want to shift the way we look at transportation, and it's gonna take the entire community.

You know, we need to say, maybe I'm going to take a slightly more inconvenient path up the mountains for now to prove the concept so that we can remove phase three because it's not necessary.

David Page:

So Jay, before I pass it over to Anthony, can you just, I just want to back up three steps for people who maybe haven't grappled with. Well, right. So you've proposed some solutions, you've talked about the gondola. Can you just back up and give us a little picture of what are the issues in I guess Little Cottonwood in particular? You mentioned like during leaf season. There's no parking. What does it look like on an average morning in winter when there's fresh snow if I want to get up from Salt Lake to ski across from Alta there on those backcountry...

Jay Erikson:

yeah, you're up before the sun for sure. There's not a lot of parking in there, and Alta just Screwed everyone with parking. We used to have free parking by Grizzly Gulch. They said technically they own that area and then they put it on a reservation system. That's for pass holders. So that's been frustrating, and the ski bus doesn't run early enough. So you either are a couple areas you can go up and park, but you're up early. And if you're not down early enough, it could be one to two hours for the eight miles. And if you have a tourist, let's say from Phoenix, with beautiful summer tires, and they get stuck, it can be three, four hours. It can be challenging.

We just did an event for the UDOT plow drivers and for the ski bus drivers as an appreciation event to show them we don't hate UDOT, we just hate four of your leaders. But by doing so, it really allowed us to bridge the communication. And now we're working with the correct people in UDOT, and we've explained to them our issues, and now we're gonna get priority parking lots for a certain couple of the parking lots in Little and Big Cottonwood plowed by 5:30. Because before, they were like no, we need to plow the roads, we need just other stuff we'll try to get your lots by like eight or nine. We're like the first shift's already over. Like I'm trying to, if I'm feeling lazy, I'll be the second shifter. I'll go up at like 9:30, 10. Everyone's coming off Dawn Patrol. So we have very limited parking.

We have no ski buses to stop at the trailheads. And they cut our bus system in half with very odd coincidental timing at the same time they released the gondola. So they cut our public transit. But even last year with the bus service cut in half, they had 300,000 users. Our ski bus, our shuttle, I think at 1,400. So it's like, yes, this is important to have the shuttle. But the numbers of scale are astronomical.

So this is like an example from the Bend case study. It kind of shows how something can look, where it's a community area to come together. Do you actually want to be at? Then instead of having the bus stop all throughout the way there, you reverse it. Everything goes to the mobility hub, and then you have direct express buses to the key areas. And then you have microtransit shuttles that will stop at the trailheads.

David:

Cool, thank you. So tell us a little bit about what are the issues in Tahoe.

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

Well, first, I just wanted to mention to Jay that us snowboarders could have told you that Alta weren't good people for a time. But going back to Tahoe, yeah, so if you could you throw up the map that we've got there. So yeah, this is the only slide that we have and so this is new on our website we put it up last spring and this is just a backcountry zone map and the point of this wasn't to be completely comprehensive. We're not trying to give away every spot that you could ski snowboard tour in the region but it's it's a place for kind of users, and we are getting a lot of new backcountry users in the region, but just to kind of use as an initial resource and then the onus is kind of on them. And we explain that in the map lower down that users as a jumping-off point. But the reason why I have this up here is because I think what it shows is there's a lot of different zones and it's really spread out, and so we're in on the east side is Nevada, the west north south sides California, we've got in the California side we've got El Dorado, Placer, Nevada counties, you know we're on federal land, we're in state parks, we've got a lot of different jurisdictions and that creates a lot of challenges and a lot of different people that we need to talk to to get things done.

Being in the basin too in the Lake Tahoe basin we have agencies that are also you know they're kind of quasi-governmental like the Tahoe regional planning agency that really helps guide for a lot of the things that you know what we want to see accomplished and we need to work with them in order to get better transportation solutions. I mentioned when we first went when I did my intro that that TBA runs the only recreation-specific microtransit in our area. We don't want to be doing that. We don't want to be running microtransit quite frankly at all. We're not a transportation agency. I think our goal with this is to show that there's a need and a desire for alternative ways to get to trailheads. And this is more about a long-term thing. I think about younger generations, some of these new users that are coming in are very receptive to using the shuttle. We've been running a North Shore program for a few years, and last year we had a pilot program on the South Shore. All the days were used on the South Shore. 14 or 16 were used on the North Shore. So the demand is there, and that's even on some days where conditions aren't ideal. And that's a challenge too, right? We're scheduling these shuttles far off in advance. We're paying for them in advance. We don't always know what conditions are gonna be, but you need to do that. You can't just decide, hey, this Saturday we wanna run a shuttle because snow is gonna be good and people are gonna wanna use it. So that comes into an ROI then. There's a cost involved, and we're spending money on this shuttle to make this happen. And for us, it's the long term, right? It's not about the fact that we're moving X amount of people on a given Saturday. It's about, hey, agencies and government need to recognize that they need to be at the forefront. It shouldn't be us. But unfortunately, it is us right now. So we're doing the demonstrating, and that's kind of our plan is to have it go from us providing the program to eventually promoting the program. And in the interim, there's other things, too. And I loved hearing, Jay, you mentioned that the paid parking, you have planned to have that revenue go into shuttles. And to me, that's a no-brainer, too, because we think about the carrot and the stick a lot. I don't love the idea of paid parking access public land. In general, that ekes me out a

bit. There's an equity issue there. But if you've got shuttles already there, then you have the option. You have the alternative. So yeah, take the shuttle if you don't want to pay for the parking. But what we're doing in the Tahoe region is a little backward. We're creating more paid for paid parking first and the shuttles are coming down the road. The conversations are just starting about that, and that's unfortunate in something that I hope to change. And I love that idea, Jay, about at least the parking revenue going right back into shuttles.

David Page:

So Gary, you're running shuttles, too. One of the things we talked about as we were sort of planning what we were going to talk about was this idea of that being kind of a unique touch point with users. That that shuttle drive and I sort of imagined, you know Pirates of the Caribbean, and you have a driver who's telling jokes and tells you about how to You know how to move through the landscape how to take care of your dog. How where's the what's the avalanche forecast all the opportunities to educate users new and old? You know be a mentor to the people here at the trailhead. Is that something that you're working on, and how do you scale that?

Gary Kofinas:

Well, there are two things. One is yeah, you have a captive audience and we've been using that by having someone other than the driver in the van telling about the backcountry lines, talking about conditions, answering questions. There are a lot of folks who ski Teton Pass who know Teton Pass, and I would say that with the experimental shuttles we've been running, people don't say, "Oh, they're running the shuttle today, let's go take it," they come down to Teton Pass and they end up kind of somewhere in the middle of something called the bottom of old pass road, and they go, "Holy shit, a shuttle, let's do laps," and they go up. So, and then we get them and hopefully build our community.

Teton County received our area received a ten-million-dollar federal grant called the build grant and as a part of that, they're building a transit center on the east side at the base, what looks like Wilson there in that area, and a big parking lot that people park to and take a free shuttle to the ski area. And so we talked about a kiosk there that has a big screen that tells the avalanche and what we call the backcountry pledge, which are ethics of what to do in the backcountry. So I think it's an opportunity to have a captive audience and help promote the education. That, plus boots on the ground, I think, is the most effective, with these people out there just talking to folks.

You're going up Glory, and you don't have a pack on. You know about those kinds of questions.

David Page:

Anthony, are you guys doing that, too, in your shuttles? Or is it really just driver point to point? Or is that an opportunity?

I mean, one of the things that it seems like we find across the board is just that there aren't people on the ground in most places. There's nobody there to talk to people, so there's no point.

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

Yeah, for us, it's a little different because there's no one from TBA who's actually on the vehicles themselves. We contract out with a shuttle service. But that said, we're in direct contact with our user group in terms of promoting it, and we're very active in terms of on the education side of things. Obviously, we look at leave no trace, it's the bare minimum, and really try to impart that. And we do that through our member events, through Backcountry Safety Awareness Week, which is a week that we take part of. So I do think that that is vital, it's really important, but the shuttle service itself is not a primary area where we're doing it, at least not yet.

David Page:

So while you've got the mic there, Anthony, you've talked about return on investment and changing mindset. Do you have thoughts sort of strategically about how, over time, to shift from where you guys are the only ones giving people rides to where that's an agency run?

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

Sure, yeah, so it's interesting. So California has got our natural resources division, and we actually have a deputy secretary for access, Katherine Toy, and she's fantastic. And her department just put out a whole report on kind of equity for all, access for all, for throughout the whole state. And they basically have \$500 million to work with in terms of infrastructure for this. If you go through their whole thing, there's not a mention of the word plowing once, and snow is only mentioned twice, just kind of tangentially. So it's not because they're anti-backcountry skiers or snowboarders or family snowplows, because it just didn't really register in Sacramento in terms of the importance of it.

So for us, we're now having those conversations with her and her department. We've been down in Sacramento on lobbying days. We're talking to our agencies and our Forest Service Supervisor as well and really trying to look at different funding opportunities and looking at plowing in Caltrans as an access vehicle and basically recognizing that it's really expensive to go to the ski resorts and the tubing areas. And so for families that want to get a chance to get their kids on snow, one of the few inexpensive options are the snow parks. And they actually did increase their day use fees last year from \$5 to \$10. And that doesn't sound like a lot, but that's in addition to all the other costs in terms of getting up there, increasing doubling the fee is significant.

But what happened last winter, and granted it was a huge winter, a lot of the snow parks just weren't getting plowed regularly at all. And that's a real shame because that really keeps not just backcountry skiers and snowboarders from getting a chance to access some of our favorite zones but preventing kids from getting out and playing in the snow and making snowmen and sledding and being the future backcountry stewards that we're looking for. So I think it's a long game, right? And that's what we're recognizing and that creates some frustration at times. I have to say one of the few things I dislike about my role with TBA is recognizing how slow a process things are.

But staying involved, staying engaged, going to these meetings, going to these, being on these different boards and councils and having a seat at the table is integral. Otherwise, people don't know the needs and you end up with things like where I mentioned where plowing isn't even a consideration in terms of access issues. And I'm hopeful that won't be the case going forward now that we're a little bit more active.

David Page:

Jay, I'll give you the same question, basically. You've mapped out some interesting solutions. Just a question on sort of what's your strategy or what thoughts have you had moving forward? I mean, as a fellow board member, I've been privy to how complicated and difficult it's been to try to have our voice heard in the process around the gondola. And I think everyone's felt that. Even the Mormon Church was against it, and they didn't listen to that.

Jay Erikson:

They still are. They're our secret weapon.

David Page:

So yeah, so looking forward, it seems like there are solutions maybe. It's super complex. But what's the role of Wasatch Backcountry Alliance and allies in making stuff happen and making it different?

Jay Erikson:

So as Anthony and David just said, getting a seat at the table is so important. My predecessors have done a great job being able to work with the Central Wasatch Commission who we do actually really like. They released the Mountain Accord which was a fantastic document that was like so sensible and really was a proven solution and then a lot of corruption happened and then they released the EIS on La Cottonwood. It's like I know Snowbirds hate ALTA but all of us hate Snowbird more because they're the primary driver for all of.

But yesterday was a big win. I had a conference call with the mayor of Sandy who and Sandy is the town at the base of Little Cottonwood Canyon, and I just got us a seat at the table for the Little Cottonwood winter recreation planning group with the Big Cottonwood or with Cottonwood Heights, Sandy, Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, and the Central Wasatch Commission. So we finally have a seat at the table to talk about these things but it comes down to Education and making it make sense. So that's why we're really working with elected officials to say like, can we get some of these mobility hubs in test phase? Because it is part of phase one. We got \$150 million in funding. Friends of Little Cottonwood hired a lobbyist. We got 150 million four years early. We thought it was the biggest one ever. And then UDOT said you can't release any of the money until the gondola is approved. So the gondola is approved. And now we have 150 million in funding. And we want to be able to influence where that money goes. Because right now we have the buses to bring back the ski bus in both lines of service. But they're saying they can't hire drivers, which is obnoxious because of how much, it's a \$1.2 billion industry in Utah. It's our biggest industry. So you think they could cough up some cash.

But one of the things we want to work with more is the resorts. Okay. Do you want to make more money and you want to have people happier when they're there? Do you want a family stranded outside at the bus stop for three hours like last year? No. So how about you work with us instead of against us because we want the same thing. We want to have more best days ever. And That's what it comes down to is how do we work together to get these seats at the table, to work with the other stakeholders, to provide a value proposition that says this solution makes the most sense so that we can get buy-in. But we want cities to have education plans on their website. We want the airport to have kiosks that say, this is how you use the ski bus. And we want the resorts to be posting this. We want our organization to be posting this. But it's not a backcountry ski issue. It's a systematic transportation issue for the entire Wasatch Front.

David Page:

Gary, you're giving me a look like you got something to say. So I'm just going to let you say it.

Gary Kofinas:

I'm going to raise the question again. We're all looking at shuttles as a solution. What are the possible unintended consequences? Do shuttles increase the problem of congestion? And I'm an old guy. In the '70s, I used to eat Teton Pass. We used to make an extra round of waffles. Otherwise, if we got to the top too early, we had to break trail. That doesn't happen now. And a lot of our constituents, the people working with us, say there are too many people out there.

Now I know where to go to get away from them, but so in our case, should we close the parking lot at the summit? Make people skin up. We live in a world where the 14-year-olds are all riding e-bikes. I'm just kind of raising maybe the underbelly of what do shuttles increase the number of people getting in the backcountry, and is that okay? The folks who study backcountry recreation say the best way to limit the numbers of people in the backcountry is not to have a permit system but just limit access. So I'll just throw that out there.

Jay Erikson:

We don't have the privilege to pretend that's an option at all. We are facing a huge influx in demand. We are facing backcountry recreation popping off, we want people to be able to access the same life-changing terrain that so many of us have been through, but getting more people there is part of it. It's education and that is the most important. It's educating our members, educating our users, educating people about coming here is, you know, do you have to go out at five in the morning? You know, can you go out at 9 or 10? Can you take that second shift? Can you go out at 2 p.m. and then come down after traffic? You know, can we split up when we're going up? And it's learning, or like we just had it with our trail counting program, you can look at when each trail is being used. So you could go in and be like, hey, last Saturday in February was a big powder day. These trails were so busy. So go to other areas and teach people other areas to help disperse it and get education and get mentorship and get partners because there's certain areas that are slammed but there's other areas that don't have a lot of usage that have awesome terrain. So for us, we can't pretend that we're not going to have an increase in usage. We have to learn how to handle it and that's educating the youth, educating

the users and get people more focused on community because self-entitlement is destroying all of this.

David Page:

Anthony, go.

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

Yeah, I mean, Jay, I think you nailed a lot of what I wanted to say on the education side, and that's where we come in. I mean, we have to play a big role in that, and as good a job as we're doing, we need to do a better job. And that said, and I'm glad that that map is still up there, and you can see, we've got a lot of zones. And I feel like we've got a lot of public land. So this is maybe different regionally. So I can't speak to other regions, but I can speak to the Lake Tahoe region. And we have plenty of room to put people up high. Where we don't have room right now is the parking. I've never really ever experienced a backcountry tour where after the first 10 minutes do I see a bunch of people. That just doesn't really happen. I think it's pretty easy to get away from people. The issue for us is the getting around, the driving, and then the lack of adequate parking. And shuttle isn't the only solution to that. There's got to be some different things. We need more trailheads, quite frankly. We need more trailheads, quite frankly. We don't have enough year-round trailheads for the amount of people in the region. In some of our summer trailheads that could serve as backcountry trailheads, the Forest Service Gate closes, and then there's no plowing, and then it forces people to park in neighborhoods. We have something that's, I think, maybe not completely unique to other areas, but a lot of our backcountry terrain rises right out of neighborhoods, and so that creates some conflicts where people are parking, sometimes blocking driveways, blocking mailboxes, and getting ticketed and towed. And some people are getting ticketed and towed for not doing those things that are egregious and deserve to be ticketed and towed for. But some people are getting ticketed last winter just for parking at the end of a cul-de-sac, because there was a couple inches of snow on the ground and it was considered snow removal, even though the plows were not out on those days. So those are issues that we're looking to tackle as well. I mean, ultimately, the public land that rises out in neighborhoods shouldn't be, essentially, country clubs for the people that are fortunate enough to live there. It's public land. So we need to find adequate solutions to get people to access the public land there.

David Page:

Here, here. Provocative question there, Gary. So I wanna open it up to the public, but just a note from my vantage. I really appreciate the conversation. I appreciate you guys coming together. It's, you know, it's part of, I think, our vision as a coalition with Winter Wildlands Alliance is that, you know, we work on these hyper-local issues that really matter to the locals and then, you know, another region is dealing with the same thing but maybe not communicating. And so being able to have a forum where we can occasionally share best practices and new ideas and also weigh in together on, you know, when it comes time to weigh in on the gondola to be sure that we've got a national voice on that and not just, you know, one little group of backcountry skiers. I think that's really important across the board, whether it's forest planning, winter travel

planning, transit solutions. It's just, it's, you know, the more we can do to come together and propose solutions, the better it's gonna be.
From the public, Keith.

Keith:

Yeah, thanks guys, appreciate it. So in Tahoe and in the Tetons, I assume you guys have a rural transportation authority. You have bus services, right?

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

Bus services, yes.

Keith:

Yeah, and have you approached them with the shuttle?

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

Yeah, we don't fully have that because I think as you saw on the map, our areas are so spread out. We've got different counties, different states. So we have issues where let's say up on the North Shore, we have a kind of a government paid for microtransit called TART Connect. the problem is it does a hard stop at the El Dorado County line and a lot of the best touring is going to be south of that line so we have issues along those lines so that's why these kind of more private public partnerships I think have the potential to be better in our region ultimately like we shouldn't have these hard lines right we shouldn't have issues like that in the whole region should be working together but that's a ways off I mean I do think those conversations are starting to happen but it's not a next two to three year thing.

Keith:

And how about in the Tetons?

Gary Kofinas:

We have a bus service it's called the start system it does run commuters from the west the west side to the east side to Victor Driggs over to Jackson they are so maxed out they are sympathetic to what we want to do they've even that's why I've approached him about giving us the vehicle and let us running it but they have no bandwidth and even in you if you know what Jenny Lake is which is at the base of the Tetons in the park you cannot take a bus from town to Jenny Lake much less service backcountry skiers so the issue is they have organizational capacity issues but they like it like the idea of it.

David Page:

Connor in the back and then over to Pete.

Connor Ryan:

So I think with the unique population situations that each of your areas have, and with Pete's talk in mind from last night, where it's like we all want to have that perfect silent powder day where you don't hear anything, but the whoops of your friends. But also we're faced with this

thing where we're like, this is an incredibly transformative, beautiful, powerful sport that we have, and we want to share it with everybody. So I wonder if you have found or if there's any direct evidence that you have or case studies that show that maybe we're on a bit of a bell curve when it comes to like access and like our perception of being on our own in these spaces. Because as you talk about it, Jay, I feel like there's so much stuff in the Wasatch that I've gotten to experience through other people where I'm like, whoa, we're way out here. I would have never known and I couldn't have figured out how to get here on my own. Jack's taken me some spots like that. and you're a quarter mile from a road. Yeah, exactly. And so I just wonder if there's any kind of evidence you guys have around that of, yeah, as we improve access, first it's going to get busier, and then it's going to get better.

Jay Erikson:

I can go with the first response on that. So I know Tahoe and Granted Backcountry Alliance both launched membership programs, and it's saved my soul by not having to do all this stuff by myself. But that's one of the big things we're working on is people are less likely to make shitty self-entitled decisions when they feel like they're part of something. So we want to create a community for backcountry users so people can feel a part of something so they have accountability. And I think when you see these people more often, because right now in the Wasatch field, you go up the canyon and you go home and take a nap. There's like nothing to do. So being able to have a community focus and education and stewardship I think we'll I think we have a huge uptick right now but it's because people don't know how to recreate responsibly.

So I think one of the big things we want to do is teach people how to be stewards and to connect with the community so that they feel like they're more privileged and can go into these backcountry zones and be like I want every generation after me to experience this. And I think that's the only way we're able to really tackle this is through community and education.

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

I just want to add, and I don't have the hard numbers in front of me, so this is somewhat anecdotal. And if anybody can correct me on this, please feel free. We definitely saw what I would consider an uptick in terms of backcountry users during the height of COVID, especially when ski areas were shut down. This past year, which was a great winter, I definitely saw a fair amount of people out there, but it didn't seem to be growing, certainly not at any sort of exponential level. And I think we're in, all of us in here are into a somewhat unique sport, backcountry skiing and snowboarding. There's a cost of admission, and it's not just the gear and the education. It takes a lot of effort, and it's not something that everybody wants to do, I don't think. And even if they think they want to, once they try it a few times, not everybody gets hooked. I have a hard time understanding that, But yeah, not everybody does, right? So I do think that it is reasonable to think that you're gonna reach some level of like, okay, a little bit of an increase every year, but not these huge jumps like we may have seen in the past five years. And again, that's just kind of a little bit of my opinion, I don't know if that's entirely accurate.

Jay Erikson:

We're experiencing the exact opposite problem. Our resorts are super crowded and people are fed up with it and sick of it and dealing with resort traffic. The higher up at the canyon you go, the longer you're stuck in the red snake. So we're having a huge boom in backcountry users because people are just fed up with being in a super crowded resort.

Gary Kofinas:

We are putting great effort into education. We're trying to manage the congestion issue by not making more and larger parking lots. And at the, but, there are more people than there have ever been going into the backcountry skiing and riding. And people are grumbling more and more about it, particularly the locals. And I know that there is a, call it a tipping point, calling a threshold, where you're, the experience that so transformed my love of winter backcountry changes. I mean, I've skied Grand Monte and Chamonix and we talk about the powder hour. It's gone. Boom. And we just have to be aware of that, not necessarily try and limit the numbers but know that there might be a place where there's, we don't want the experience that we have to suddenly be changed because of the many, many people. Who knows? We may never get there. But just be aware of it.

David Page:

Connor's got to follow up there.

Connor Ryan:

So just to clarify a little bit because I love what all of you said but I just wonder if there's this thing where it's like like with the Tetons in particular I feel this sense of like or at least like knowing the region there a little bit better. It seems like there's this thing of it's like okay everybody's headed to the glory because that's like the simple thing to figure out. Is there a bit of a remedy for some of these access issues and being like, well, yeah, we've got the secret spot, such and such over. Like, if everybody's secret spot was a little bit less gate kept, is there ways in which that kind of would improve the process overall? And I think like, does that community aspect that Jay had mentioned like, play into that? You know, is there a way that like, our kind of liberation is maybe in our togetherness and in our shifting of like, this spot is for locals as opposed to like, let's make it known because it actually relieves some of these specific issues.

Gary Kofinas:

Well, what we didn't have 10 years ago were guidebooks and now we have apps and there are lots of places. But like you said, people go up, 80% of them parking on top are going up, glory. I bump into them and they go, which way down? I'm like, oh, gosh. So yeah, and being a good citizen. You see somebody out there and they ask you a question and you don't worry about telling them where your good fishing hole is. You share information, you give them a great experience and you're happy to have them there. And that's what we, you know. I agree that that's a kind of a way of dealing with this.

Jay Erikson:

We have WBS ski. It's a Wasatch backcountry ski map and app and it has 70% of the all backcountry ski runs mapped out with AvalancheTrain readily available. You can click it, you can get directions to Trailhead, guide you with the compass, so I'll show you.

Audience member:

I got a question over here. I just came from another conference for an outdoor media conglomerate and basically the takeaway is that we all feel better in the outdoors, so get outside. And I felt like the lone wolf out there being like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. We're loving most of these places to death and these places are fragile. So my question for you guys is have you started any collaboration? I know we're sponsored by some of these companies and things like this, but it seems on one hand, we're trying to protect and inform and educate the public, and on the other hand, the company selling us all the gear to go do it are telling you to go out and be, bro, bro, stoke it up without thinking about it. It seems like there could be much greater collaboration with the broadcasters, the marketeers of what we're trying to protect.

David Page:

Yeah, that's a huge topic, and it's something that, I mean, it's interesting. I've been at this for about seven years now, when I first came in, part of what drew me in was the outdoor retailer thing, and there was this, you know, it's a trade show. It's a huge industry event selling gear. But back when that was in person and when the whole industry was there, there was this kind of interesting zeitgeist that I felt when I was starting where it was like there was pressure on those companies to do good, to be responsible, to do conservation, and to engage in equitable access. And there was money flowing to conservation groups from those companies. And then in a mix of like OR moving from Salt Lake to Denver, which was an important thing politically, and then COVID, that event really just fizzled. It just disappeared. And so yes, there are still trade shows, but there isn't any longer that focus on the industry. Like, what are you guys doing to mitigate the impacts that you have from the gear that you're selling? Doesn't exist anymore. And what I've noticed, and my fellow Outdoor Alliance EDs have noticed, that it's just pulling. We don't have time to chase the corporate dollars anymore, and they're not there anymore. And the industry is paying. They pay into Conservation Alliance, which is awesome. And sometimes people can get a Conservation Alliance grant, and it's really around this sort marketable conservation product like how many acres of this landscape are you gonna save and can we take a photo of it and and it's like gap funding like for a film it's like if we can get this done in a year we'll give you X number of thousands of dollars if it translates to this many acres but if it you know the complexity of what we've been talking about Conservation Alliance is like yeah we can't fund that we can't market that we don't know how to do it, and the companies too are like I don't know how are we gonna fund that. So, they're bright shining spots, some companies who are still doing it, but they're doing it at a loss. REI has lost money the last two years, and they've committed, like, this is something that we need to do, but that thing that you're talking about is real, and we need to keep that pressure on and find ways to keep that pressure on, and it's not super obvious right this moment.

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

I just want to say, so, you know, in my other work, I'm a photographer and videographer, And I've been fortunate in some of my projects in recent years to see a few of the companies that get it. And it's certainly not all of them. I'll just point to Flylo as one example. And I think that they are really on it. They've supported a couple of film projects that I've worked on. And one was about just how to create, giving back to Area Trails and this crazy effort that this kid did on Everest Ride to help support Area Trails. and this other one is one, it's with Brennan Lagasse and Michelle Parker about recreating on native lands and there's a sundowner siren that just got silenced. It was the last sundowner siren. Is everyone familiar with a sundowner siren? No. So it's siren in western towns that used to go off in areas at six o'clock or whatever time and it meant if every one person of color and it's mostly pointing towards indigenous people need to be off the street in the next hour or else who knows what would happen to them and there's plenty of stories of some awful things that happened to them. and a lot of our terrain or backcountry terrain that you know particularly in the south shore we're up on the peaks Friel Peak Job's Job's sister and you look down right below the in Carson Valley is the town of Minden where this siren took place so so yeah sorry long story short so Flylow support is supporting like that sort project in terms of getting these stories out and things like that and I just feel like that we can do a job then of highlighting the companies that are doing a good job so those are the companies that get more support you know and then one last thing I'll just add I'm also an avid mountain biker and I feel like the mountain bike industry in general is pretty pretty awful and with it you just see lots of photos of people roosting berms and things like that and it's it's disheartening how I feel like they've been slower to change and slower to get to where they should be then then then the ski industry and the ski industry still way to go.

Jay Erikson:

I know like one thing we're doing in the Wasatch is we're launching the Be Local, Buy Local program. So if you're a member we have three different tiers 75, 150, and 1,000 and we're working with local companies to have them give discounts to our members. So for example Wonder Alpine they do a great job with sustainability their algae line and they're giving us 10% off soft goods 10% off hard goods and then pick out your own pair of skis watch it get made, they'll mount them for you and go ski with the athlete teams. So we're trying to really promote these local businesses that are sustainable, that are environmentally friendly because our goal is, you know, I've talked a lot of people and 10% is kind of the price threshold between buy online and buy in person. So we want our members to go into communities and into these businesses that support these, you know, support their passions and their dreams and stop buying, you know, bad countries that gives us some money but They're also in Park City. And we have companies like that where they're just printing product. And we really want to focus on used gear, on the importance of consignment stores in areas, on sustainability, reusability. We've done stuff with Patagonia on their secondhand product line, teaching people how to fix their own clothes. We're talking about potentially doing an education event on that but you don't need new stuff every season and that's like again education. Like do you need three different color ski jackets? maybe.

David Page:

yeah Gary go.

Gary Kofinas:

there's a meeting happening right now and I was fighting I couldn't so my colleague Tom Toriano is there with a group of outdoor retail outdoor company representatives and they're talking about responsible use So that's encouraging, and as Tom and I talked about this beforehand, we talked about the hunting-fishing model. Those companies are required, I think, through taxes, to contribute to stuff that ensures the conservation of the resource and the land, you know, there's a way there.

And there was a piece of legislation that was proposed, one of my dear friends from in a company that I won't name, nixed it. And as a consequence, we have this hodgepodge of different kind of companies. So that's another model to look at.

And every time I go out in the back country, I go, everybody's, where's all the old skis? Where did they go? Where's all the old gear? They've all got this new stuff. Anyhow, so it's a really important topic. Thanks.

David Page:

Tyler.

Tyler Ray:

Hey guys, great job up there. Appreciate everything that you're doing. and I'm Tyler with Granite Backcountry Alliance, and we can commiserate together, particularly with a beer afterwards on the efforts that it takes to do what you're doing, because it's a lot of work, and all of our issues are a little bit different. So it's super interesting for me to hear that, knowledge sharing, and really important. While I was sitting here listening to you talk, I think the brands, and I think that's a whole nother topic, and we'll probably touch on that tomorrow on a panel, and we'll wrap that into some of it. But what I wanted to hear about today is that You know, it's clear that amongst the three year organizations, it sounds like it's quite clear that stewardship education is the low hanging fruit, right? And that is the piece that really turns the dial. So Winter Wildlands has this amazing Ski Kind program, code of conduct. What percentage of your stewardship efforts incorporate that? That's the question.

Well, I'll just say one more thing. if we all utilize some of the resources that we have in the room with our different organizations, so there's a similar message, not just in your local community, but nationally, our voice just gets elevated so much higher. So I guess I could phrase the question, but I could also ask everyone in the room to also do that at the same time. Because all of David's work, Hillary and so forth, makes it challenging if we don't, if folks aren't embracing the tools that we already have. And if they need to be improved, then let's do that too. So anyway, that's the question I guess. Ski kind, if you guys incorporate it there.

Jay Erikson:

The response that you don't want. Basically none. We're transforming that right now. We just did a big leadership change. We just hired our first ED and we're launching. We've been an advocacy group. We have not been a community group. We have not been focused on

backcountry education. We have not been focused on any of that. We've been focused on land access, on transit, on all these issues and we are fundamentally transforming the organization. And it's gonna be great to learn more about your membership program, about Tahoe's, so that we can become the backbone of the community for the backcountry users. And right now we are not respected in that way, and we're looking at a very aggressive political org. And that's one of the things, that's why I was elected the VP, is because I'm leading the project to transform the way we look at community and to build it. because educating is like we have 15,000 subscribers that maybe a thousand read it where it's like how do we get that education out? you know we have 20,000 people on Instagram, so it's like once we have this community and we get by and if people feel like they're part of something bigger, then we can educate them because they have buy-in. and like this Vermont backcountry ski handbook, Awesome, totally going to use a bunch of this, Ski Kind. By the end of this conference, I will have stuff ready. We're in the middle of redoing the website, and that's what we want to focus on, is how to educate people. And that's why I'm really glad to be here, be new to this industry, is because there's such a wealth of knowledge in this room right now, that I would love any help possible.

Anthony Cupaiuolo:

I'll just add that we have very similar messaging And your point is taken about working on the exact same messaging, so we're not fighting different battles. But I think our messaging is not only similar, but we certainly incorporate the Be Kind messaging through multiple events when we host the Backcountry Film Festival. Last year, three or four spots, and this year we plan on hopefully increasing that to five or six.

And I think the Backcountry Film Festival is a really great opportunity to not only reinforce the Ski Kind, which is usually incorporated at the beginning of the whole session, but the films that are selected for it, they really, most of them kind of play into that whole messaging as well. Not all of them, some of them are just fun, right? But a lot of them really do. And so I think if you have the opportunity to go, or more importantly, if you have the ability to host a Backcountry Film Festival, I certainly recommend doing that. It's a great opportunity to meet more people in your user group and to be a fundraiser for your groups as well.

Gary Kofinas:

Yes to SkiKind, yes to the film festival. I want to jump back to the funding issue that happened in our area that might be helpful to you. There is a tax levied on lodging, and that goes into a statewide pool. And it's really a promotion of tourism, and a lot of states have that. and we were able through a lot of people's efforts to say can you add in, promote tourism and educate for sustainable tourism. And they finally bought it at the Wyoming legislative level. I don't know how that happened. They must've been drinking or something. And so there's an enormous amount of money that we have access to which funds our ambassador program. And it could help all of us if we could look where are the tourism promotion dollars going and what about sustainable tourism and can it fund that too? So that's just something for us. And I'd just like to echo that we've had some conference calls with backcountry alliances, a few of them. They've been so helpful in learning from each other. So I encourage you guys to keep bringing us together to just learn from each other.

David Page:

Yes sir, we will do so. Thank you.