

THE ASPEN TIMES

A tale of two Aspens

Conspicuous consumption steals spotlight from Aspen's environmental efforts

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ASPEN — Weeks like this challenge the notion in the eyes of some observers that Aspen can ever truly be an environmental leader.

Aspen is the kingdom of conspicuous consumption during the holidays. The ultra-wealthy leave their troubles behind and whisk into town for an orgy of partying, shopping and even some skiing. Scores of private jets line the tarmac of the Pitkin County Airport and mansions that sit vacant for most of the year suddenly host more activity than a medieval castle.

A study commissioned this fall by the Aspen-based Sopris Foundation determined that the average vacation home emits 12 percent more carbon dioxide than resident-occupied homes.

Single-family residences that are second homes produce 35 percent more carbon dioxide than full-time, single-family residences.

Vacation homes account for 58 percent of the 5,858 residences in Aspen and surrounding neighborhoods in Pitkin County. They account for 61 percent of Aspen's carbon emissions, concluded the study by Rick Heede of Climate Mitigation Services.

The frustrating paradox of the situation is that the homes that emit the most gases that contribute to global warming are those sitting vacant for most of the year. The average vacation home is used 88 days per year and sits vacant for 277 days, the study said.

"Many energy demands are unnecessary and egregious: driveway heating, roof melt systems, hot tubs, towel bar heaters, 24/7 exterior lighting. ... Excessive energy consumption, often with no comfort or security benefits, represents a problem for a community that aims to reduce community energy intensity and emissions of greenhouse gases," Heede wrote.

129 homes over 8,000 square feet

While the findings of the study might not be well known, it's no secret that Aspen is a capital of consumption and, thus, an easy target for critics. A lobbyist for the oil and gas industry angrily labeled the town hypocritical earlier this month when Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland joined forces with other mayors in the region to protest natural gas drilling on public lands in western Colorado known as the Roan Plateau.

"Billionaires in Aspen, Colorado, and liberal politicians like Aspen's Mayor Mick Ireland are attacking natural gas development while that community's growing number of mountain-top mansions burn more natural gas in a day than most

Heated driveways — such as this one at a mansion on Red Mountain — are thwarting Aspen's environmental efforts. (Jordan Curet/The Aspen Times)



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The consumptive side

A report compiled for a nonprofit organization called the Sopris Foundation examined second homes in the Aspen area and their energy consumption. The key findings include:

- 58 percent of the 5,858 residences in Aspen and surrounding areas of Pitkin County are vacation homes.

The average Aspen vacation home is unoccupied 277 days per year.

Coloradoans use in a week,” said a statement from Americans for American Energy.

The Sopris Foundation’s study makes it hard to dispute Schnacke’s point. It found that there are 55 homes in the Aspen metro area that are larger than 10,000 square feet and another 74 between 8,000 and 10,000 square feet. And it’s not just the old McMansions that are culprits when it comes to energy consumption.

“Local energy building codes have moderated the energy-intensity of new or re-built homes, and transferable development rights (TDRs) have focused development out of the backcountry into and near the city, with the unintended consequence of allowing larger and more consumptive homes,” the study said. “As a consequence, some new homes use as much electricity as whole blocks of average American homes built elsewhere.”

- Although they aren’t used often, vacation homes produce 90,500 tons of carbon dioxide annually. That accounts for 61 percent of Aspen’s annual carbon dioxide emissions and skews the town’s carbon footprint.
- Aspen residences that are occupied full-time emit an estimated 144 pounds of carbon dioxide per day compared to 606 pounds per day for vacation homes.

Source: Climate Mitigation Services and the Sopris Foundation

Can mansions be eco-friendly?

Officials at the Sopris Foundation and other environmentalists aren’t writing Aspen off just yet.

The foundation’s study includes an extensive list of actions that second homeowners can undertake to reduce their energy consumption. The study can be found at www.soprisfoundation.org.

Sopris Foundation Director Piper Foster said she is optimistic there is a “sea change” nearing in the attitudes toward consumption. “The evolution of public thought is changing about how we see the aesthetics of huge and consumptive houses,” she said.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal foresaw that the ultra-wealthy will immerse themselves in the green movement in 2008. They will shop for more fuel efficient jets, for example. But the article cast doubts on the concept of “eco-mansions.”

Foster said there is dissent among the conservation community on how environmentally friendly a large home can be. “Just because you’re greening your 10,000-square-foot house, how green is it?” she asked.

Groundbreaking green effort

In some respects, Aspen is light years ahead of other communities in offsetting the sins of its mansions. The city and county, through the Community Office for Resource Efficiency established a groundbreaking program in 2000 that essentially taxes the wealthy for the luxury of energy consumption. It’s been called the world’s strictest carbon dioxide tax.

The efficient side

- A program that assesses one fee on large homes in Aspen and Pitkin County and another fee for excessive energy consumption has raised nearly \$8 million since it was created in 2000. The revenues fund energy efficiency projects and renewable energy initiatives in the Roaring Fork Valley. The goal of the program is to remove three tons of carbon emissions for each ton of new carbon emitted.

Home builders pay a fee for homes larger than 5,000 and homes larger than 10,000 square feet. If they exceed an energy budget that is written into local building codes. So, a snowmelt system in a driveway or an outdoor pool will require the homeowner to pay into the fund.

The program raised \$1.5 million this year and has raised just shy of \$8 million since its inception, said CORE Director Gary Goodson. The program has garnered national attention and widespread praise.

- About 75 percent of Aspen’s electricity comes from renewable sources.

That includes 31 percent from hydroelectric sources, 28 percent from wind farms and 16 percent from contracts with wholesale power providers. The goal is to have all electricity produced from renewable sources within five years.

The revenues are plowed back into projects promoting energy efficiency or renewable energy sources. For example, \$250,000 was spent on efficiency upgrades at the Aspen Middle School that will prevent emissions of a million pounds of carbon dioxide per year over the life of the building, Goodson said. Another example of projects made possible by the consumption tax was solar hot water systems at affordable housing projects.

Mayor proud of Aspen’s efforts

The energy consumption of mansions built since the inception of the program has been more than offset. The goal aims to remove three tons of carbon emissions for each ton of new emissions, Goodson said.

- The Aspen city government commissioned a study to determine how much carbon the community emits, then came up with steps in the Canary Action Plan to reduce emissions by 30 percent by 2020 and by 80 percent by 2050.

Aspen Mayor Ireland said the town has nothing to be ashamed of on the environmental front. Aspen is hardly alone in being an energy consumptive area, he said, but at least it has a plan to reduce its carbon emissions.

Source: Community Office for Resource Efficiency and the city of Aspen

Through a program called the Canary Initiative, the city has assessed its community carbon footprint. Now it is implementing steps to lighten its load through its Canary Action Plan. The goal is to reduce the community's carbon emissions by 30 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050. More information on the city's program can be found at www.aspenglobalwarming.com.

Ireland said he believes Aspen's wealthy second-home owners are as committed to those goals as anyone. He isn't blaming their lifestyles for skewing Aspen's carbon emissions.

"I think a lot of people sincerely want to be part of the solution," Ireland said. "Ultimately, I think we can be a zero carbon footprint town. It's a big goal, but I think we can get there."

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