



Following decades of development leading to various successes in the RMOW, Whistler embarked on a visionary journey in 2002, culminating in the development of the Whistler2020 sustainability goals (which can be found at the Whistler Centre website). These goals addressed specific challenges and opportunities facing the community at the time, encompassing five priority areas and 16 core strategies aimed at guiding Whistler towards a sustainable future.

Over the years, Whistler has diligently worked towards realizing the vision outlined in Whistler2020, with notable progress made in environmental conservation, economic diversification, and community engagement. However, the journey towards sustainable development is an ongoing endeavor requiring review, collective vision, commitment and action from all interest holders.

As the RMOW approached the target year of 2020, it took stock of the progress made towards the Whistler2020 strategies and recognized the need for a more comprehensive framework to guide future growth. This led to an extensive community engagement process, and the adoption of an updated Official Community Plan (OCP). The OCP built upon the foundation laid by Whistler2020 and previous OCP, addressing evolving challenges and opportunities facing the community.

The transition to the OCP community vision signified a continued commitment to sustainable development principles, ensuring that Whistler remains at the forefront of environmental stewardship, economic vitality and social inclusivity for generations to come. The RMOW's OCP articulated a community vision that defines what must exist in Whistler for us to be successful and sustainable in the long-term:

**“Whistler: A place where our community thrives, nature is protected, and guests are inspired.”**

This vision serves as a guiding beacon for the policies established in the OCP, shaping decisions on all aspects of community planning and land use management for the RMOW over the next five to ten years and beyond. However, emerging from the COVID pandemic revealed a variety of scenarios that could occur as we look at Whistler 20 years into the future.

In response to emerging challenges and uncertainties, including the impacts of the pandemic, the RMOW held the Whistler Sessions to explore future scenarios. These sessions facilitated discussions among over 40 diverse interest holders, leading to the development of four scenarios envisioning potential outcomes for Whistler in 2050. These scenarios present a range of possibilities, prompting reflection on how Whistler's shared future might unfold and how resilience, intention and collaboration could shape a more sustainable trajectory.

The COVID pandemic, following the 2019 peak in global travel, exacerbated concerns over overtourism, leading the tourism industry to embrace sustainable and regenerative practices. Overtourism, characterized by overcrowding and negative impacts on local communities, prompted destinations worldwide to rethink tourism development. Recognizing the interconnectedness between tourism, environmental conservation, and social well-being, stakeholders have increasingly embraced sustainable and regenerative tourism principles. This shift entails minimizing negative impacts and actively contributing to the regeneration of ecosystems, preservation of cultural heritage, and empowerment of local communities.

With these shifts and the outcomes of the Whistler Sessions in mind, we reconsidered destination management practices needed to address the downfalls of the Whistler Sessions scenarios. We also explored how tourism can preserve and protect Whistler's unique culture, natural assets and infrastructure for a preferred future.

Whistler benefits from inspiring leaders and businesses implementing visions and strategies supporting these practices. From values-based marketing with Tourism Whistler's Place Branding exercise to sustainability objectives in Vail's "Epic Promise" and the RMOW's [Big Moves Strategy](#) or shifting focus to the supply side of tourism through Destination BC's Destination Strategy, Whistler had no shortage of inspiration. However, success requires alignment and deeper cross-organization collaboration to garner the momentum needed to move our community forward together.

Informed by the Whistler Sessions, Council's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan identified ST as a priority area alongside housing, climate action and community engagement. ST is a strategic approach leveraging innovation and collaboration to enhance visitor experiences while safeguarding Whistler's unique culture, natural assets and infrastructure.

Looking ahead, Whistler's commitment to ST will be measured by its ability to attract visitors and serve as a model for sustainable tourism practices. By embracing this objective and working together towards its realization, Whistler is poised to maintain its position as a premier destination while preserving the long-term well-being of its residents and the natural beauty that makes it unique.

### **Current State and Next Steps**

The RMOW has defined ST as a unified and collaborative approach to destination management. Destination management through the lens of ST will strive to ensure that Whistler's community, environment, and culture continue to be enhanced and supported by tourism. In our exploration of ST, we will be questioning what it is for Whistler to be a global leader. We will also be finding productive ways to challenge our community to consider how they can contribute to a sustainable and equitable future and shape a destination of which they are proud.

As we strive to position Whistler as a global leader in sustainable tourism, the ST initiative began with extensive research to learn from the many inspiring examples of destination stewardship across the globe. We drew examples of destination plans from examples such as the Culture of Care introduced through Lake Tahoe's Destination Stewardship Plan to the community and environment-driven regenerative tourism plan in New Zealand's Queenstown Lakes. Additionally, insights were gleaned from destinations implementing tourism management strategies such as Amsterdam, renowned for its innovative and brave urban planning to manage tourism flows, and Bhutan, which prioritizes Gross National Happiness over GDP, we sought to distill the essence of effective stewardship strategies.

This research provided us with a foundation to envision what ST could look like for Whistler and how we can elevate our tourism practices. One key lesson that emerged was that success can only be achieved through building partnerships and meaningful collaboration. To this end, the RMOW has established a Smart Tourism Committee (STC), bringing together key industry interest holders and destination management experts to dream big and provide support for a collaborative and aligned approach to destination management.

The STC will continue and evolve much of the work that was initiated through the outgoing Economic Partnership Initiative Committee (EPI). The EPI was formed in 2013 and worked towards the goal of a prosperous resort economy that continues to support a healthy, sustainable resort community; and remains consistent with Whistler's [unique mountain culture](#). The success of the EPI was in its collaboration and alignment of resort partners who worked together to help Whistler rebound successfully from the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis.

Building on the successful work of the EPI, the STC aims to enhance economic resilience by integrating social and environmental priorities. Now, with an expanded focus on tourism sustainability, the STC has

put additional weight into the importance of strong social and environmental foundations to support tourism.

To accomplish this, the STC expands the EPI's membership from nine to 16 voting members as follows:

- Mayor
- Two members of Council
- RMOW Chief Administrative Officer
- RMOW General Manager of Corporate Services and Public Safety
- Tourism Whistler, President
- Whistler Blackcomb, Chief Operating Officer
- Whistler Chamber of Commerce, Executive Director
- Squamish Lílwat Cultural Centre, Executive Director
- Hotel Association of Whistler Representative
- Restaurant Association of Whistler Representative
- Arts Whistler Representative
- Four Members-at-Large

In November 2023, the RMOW created a Request for Proposals, seeking a consultant to lead the facilitation of a ST visioning journey, designed to guide Whistler's collaborative approach to destination management and stewardship. Resonance, renowned for their expertise in destination branding and strategic planning, were the successful candidates and supported a visioning workshop held in April 2024. This workshop, conducted in partnership with outgoing members of the EPI committee, served as a crucial first step in shaping Whistler's future tourism strategy.

The primary output of this workshop will be a draft vision for the future of tourism in Whistler that will be shared in summer 2024. Community engagement will play a pivotal role in refining this vision, with input sought to ensure alignment and excitement behind a collective vision of what could be. Core themes that will emerge through this vision will explore the balance of visitors and residents, community collaboration and how to be brave with our decision making.

Support of the community and local businesses is central to the success of the vision for ST. Engagement efforts will seek to garner feedback from all interest holders to foster a sense of ownership and pride in the envisioned future of Whistler's tourism industry. The recommended reading below highlights some of the leading thinkers in the space of destination stewardship policies and practices, as well as to provide examples of initiatives being activated around the world that provide insight into the challenges facing destinations.

An example of a bold destination stewardship policy can be found in Venice where the Comune di Venezia (City of Venice) have recently established a pilot project testing a day-trip tax, where non-overnight visitors must register and pay five euros per day to visit the city. This exemplifies a difficult policy decision that seeks to find balance amidst growing tourism and visitation pressures. The tax is designed to act as a tourism deterrent, while simultaneously generating revenue that can be reinvested to help manage their tourism volume.

The actual response to Venice's actions has been varied and included local protests and critique that the fee is not enough of a deterrent to be effective, and that the revenue is not significant enough to create meaningful reinvestment (they require 35 enforcement officers to manage the initiative). Time will tell whether this approach to visitation management is effective and lasting and whether the overall impact helps preserve a quality of experience for tourists. As the ST initiative continues to evolve,

learnings from busy tourist destinations such as Venice will be reviewed to help accelerate the learning process for Whistler. In this way, the successful methods can be adopted or considered, and the unsuccessful ones can be avoided.

BC Statistics is forecasting that the population of the Lower Mainland/Southwest region could more than double to 4.9 million people by 2043. This significant increase will challenge the region's current infrastructure in unprecedented ways, necessitating proactive planning and management.

If Whistler does not update its management practices to handle added volume, we risk degrading the tourism and resident experience that has been carefully cultivated over time. We already feel the pressures of peak days, whether it is sitting in traffic, standing for hours in a lift line, or being unable to find a place to sit in our parks. If these peak days become more frequent, these issues will only intensify.

By addressing these challenges before they become critical, we can prevent the kind of overtourism issues seen in destinations like Venice, where reactive measures have been insufficient to manage the overwhelming influx of tourists. Proactive planning and effective management are essential to maintaining the quality of life for residents and the high standards of our tourism experience.

Once the ST vision is finalized, the RMOW will embark on a second phase of the ST project, focusing on the development of a collaborative destination management plan. This will be a Whistler-wide plan that will help community members, organizations and government align on the necessary actions and goals to preserve Whistler as a world class destination with innovative sustainability practices, cultural experiences and outdoor fun.

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## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

### Relevant Council Authority/Previous Decisions

June 23, 2020: [Official Community Plan Adoption Report No. 20-060 File No. 7503.03 Bylaw 2199](#)

### 2023-2026 Strategic Plan

The 2023-2026 Strategic Plan outlines the high-level direction of the RMOW to help shape community progress during this term of Council. The Strategic Plan contains four priority areas with various associated initiatives that support them. This section identifies how this report links to the Strategic Plan.

#### Strategic Priorities

Housing

*Expedite the delivery of and longer-term planning for employee housing*

Climate Action

*Mobilize municipal resources toward the implementation of the Big Moves Climate Action Plan*

Community Engagement

*Strive to connect locals to each other and to the RMOW*

Smart Tourism

*Preserve and protect Whistler's unique culture, natural assets and infrastructure*

Not Applicable

*Aligns with core municipal work that falls outside the strategic priorities but improves, maintains, updates and/or protects existing and essential community infrastructure or programs*



Staff are excited to explore the concept of ST with Council and the community and build an exciting vision for the future of sustainable tourism in our town.

### **Community Vision and Official Community Plan**

The OCP is the RMOW's most important guiding document that sets the community vision and long-term community direction. ST will come to play a pivotal role in realizing the overarching vision of the OCP. By integrating sustainable tourism practices, the Whistler not only attracts visitors but also ensures that the local environment, culture and heritage are preserved for future generations.

The synergy between ST and the broader vision of the OCP will foster a balanced and resilient community where economic growth is coupled with social well-being, environmental stewardship and cultural enrichment. This multi-faceted approach lays the foundation for a community that thrives in the truest sense of the word.

### **BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS**

The budget for ST is accounted for in the approved 2024 budget.

### **LÍŁWAT NATION & SQUAMISH NATION CONSIDERATIONS**

The RMOW is committed to working with the LÍłwat People, known in their language as *L'il'wat7úl* and the Squamish People, known in their language as the *Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw* to create an enduring relationship; establish collaborative processes for Crown land planning; achieve mutual objectives; and enable participation in Whistler's resort economy.

Smart Tourism work will be part of ongoing discussions between the RMOW and LÍłwat Nation and Squamish Nation.

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Level of community engagement commitment for this project:

Inform     Consult     Involve     Collaborate     Empower

The process to develop the draft ST vision has been a collaboration involving a group of representatives for the tourism sector and will continue to be guided by the STC.

Broader community engagement in the ST visioning process will span a spectrum of involvement, ranging from informing stakeholders about the initiative and seeking their input to actively collaborating with them in decision-making.

Through informative sessions, the community will be kept abreast of developments, objectives and opportunities for participation. Consultative approaches will invite feedback and perspectives from the community, ensuring their voices are heard and considered in the visioning process. As we progress, involvement will deepen, offering opportunities for stakeholders to actively contribute ideas, co-create solutions and shape the direction of ST in Whistler.

## SUMMARY

Building on plans, successes and experiences in Whistler's past, the RMOW has deepened its understanding of the current landscape of destination stewardship practices and is excited to facilitate exploration into how tourism evolves with our community over time. In collaboration with a group of community representatives, a draft vision for the future of Whistler's tourism is being developed, drawing on insights from diverse destinations worldwide. This vision, slated for community engagement in 2024, will serve as a foundational document for development of a collaborative destination management strategy.

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## SIGN-OFFS

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