

VALUES DRIVE ASPEN TRAVEL INNOVATIONS AND THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

[DESTINATION MARKETING STRATEGY](#)



Think Staff

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“Aspen did something. Aspen decided what it wanted to be, and it got it done. Some things are great, some things didn’t work, but at least Aspen did it. And I

would encourage other communities like this one to do something to decide, elect the people who can deliver the policies and get something done. Because if you don't, it gets done for you.” – Steve Skadron, Campus Dean and Vice President at Colorado Mountain College; former Aspen mayor

Aspen is a community that believes in good stewardship and preservation of place, and it seeks to evolve in sustainable ways as its popularity continues to grow. What does your community believe in? If your destination marketing organization (DMO) has made a destination management plan or is working on destination stewardship, you'll know it takes a whole community to make meaningful change happen.

In this episode of the Travel Beyond podcast, we sit down with former mayor Steve Skadron to discuss his views on positive change in Aspen and how that change is driven by community values and public participation. Throughout this thought-provoking episode, Steve shares his beliefs that the real arena for change stems from community values. As former mayor of Aspen, Steve's passionate about people getting involved in community projects and being the drivers for change when it comes to climate change. "It's not the climate change part that makes me worried," he says. "It's people's values that worry me. It's a default to what's easiest, not what's best. That worries me."

We also chat with Steve about the role of travel in helping the world adapt to today's challenges and how the former mayor is leading an initiative to grow the town's growing circular economy through a new program at Colorado Mountain College. Tune in to this episode for a thoughtful

discussion of community values, destination management strategies, and innovations for a more sustainable future.

In this episode, you'll learn:

- Why community values and public participation are so important to making positive changes happen.
- How travel helps positive values spread.
- How Aspen and Colorado Mountain College are scaling up the circular economy with new education and manufacturing opportunities.
- About the impacts of extreme wealth on Aspen, both positive and negative.
- How Aspen's integrated transportation system was created.

Video Player

Episode transcript

David Archer: Hello, and welcome to Travel Beyond, where we partner with leading destinations to explore the greatest challenges facing communities and the planet, surfacing their most inspiring solutions. I'm David Archer, Editorial Manager at Destination Think, and I'm recording from the coastal village of Daajing Giids, British Columbia in Haida Gwaii, the territory of the Haida Nation.

Rodney Payne: And I'm Rodney Payne, CEO at Destination Think. I am recording from Revelstoke in British Columbia, a city on the territory of four First Nations, the Sinixt, the Secwépemc, the Sylix and the Ktunaxa. On this show, we look at the role of travel and highlight destinations that are global leaders. We talk to the change makers who are addressing regenerative travel through action in their communities, often from the bottom up.

David Archer: And we're actively looking for the best examples of efforts to regenerate economies, communities, and ecosystems. So be sure to reach out if you have a story to share with us.

In the last episode, we heard about the Aspen Institute and all the ideas and influence it generates. And this time, we're going to hear about some radical ideas in action from Steve Skadron, Campus Dean and Vice President at Colorado Mountain College, and former Aspen mayor. And he's going to tell us all about the circular economy and a program he's leading called Make It Here at the college, which is training up the next generation of entrepreneurs in soft goods manufacturing and upcycling. And there is now an outdoor soft goods manufacturing certificate at the college.

This is part of his work as a leader in the Uphill Economy Initiative, which is a plan to diversify Aspen's economy into a different segment of skiing. Rodney, this is an aspect of skiing that I was not familiar with before this episode. But have you ever done any uphill activities?

Rodney Payne: I have done uphill skiing, yes. When I used to live in Idaho I got a chance. This is before I had a child when I had lots of time on my hands to uphill ski, and it's incredibly rewarding.

David Archer: Yeah. And it sounds like a lot of hard work.

Rodney Payne: It's probably moderately harder than hiking uphill, and there's a lot of sort of technical things you need to learn about different equipment, but it's really fun and really rewarding.

David Archer: Yeah. That's interesting. And when you spoke with Steve, he had a lot of good things to say about the circular economy and its relation to the outdoor tourism industry in Aspen.

But you also spoke a lot about values. And he really does seem concerned about the clashes in values locally, and between locals and visitors more so than some of the tangible risks to Aspen that we might think of due to climate or inequality, or other issues. So that leads me to wonder, are values the true arena for meaningful change?

Rodney Payne: I think clearly, yes. When I think about values, I think about really a definition around what do people really care about, right? What do we value? And if we want to change behaviour, whether that's on a local level or on a global, societal level, ultimately the way to get change to scale

is to make everyone, or enough people, care about something that you decentralize the responsibility and actions around that change.

I think, there are so many influences on values and really, collective values are culture, right? And if you can change people's values or expose different values and help people to think differently, you can influence culture within your own destination and perhaps globally.

David Archer: Yeah, that is one of the great potentials of travel, potentially, and the travel industry. Being someone who helps visitors understand what a place is about and how the locals see things.

Rodney Payne: I think that every destination has a moment to reflect on their values and think about what is it that they know that the world needs to learn. What are the values that they find to be important in this moment that the world's in? And think about the tourism experience or the travel experience as an opportunity to export those values. You get a chance to connect on a human level with people from other places. And a moment to leave an impression on them that they may take home.

And every place that I've ever seen or have been to has something that they can teach the world.

David Archer: Yeah, that's a good way to put it. What makes up a place is the people who live there. And you also had a conversation with Steve about locals and what makes someone from a place, right?

Like, what makes someone a local? And from experience, you can have all kinds of different opinions about the length of time or attributes. Steve says, "I think a local is someone who puts the place before themselves. That's a local, someone who puts a community before themselves."

And there's some good ideas in there about the greater good and decentralizing the effort to make things better. And I'm wondering if the same thing applies to visitors, or maybe the distinction between tourism and travel.

Rodney Payne: I think the key word is respect, right? From a visitor perspective, are you there to learn about a people and a place? And listen and, hear that and be respectful, or are you there just to take and extract?

And a lot of places that are embarking on a balanced approach to tourism or some aspect of destination management have used the words, we really need the right visitors without a lot of definition around them, but the right visitor is someone ultimately that is aware and has respect for the people they're interacting with, the place, the cultural norms and rules of that place, and they're really deeply curious about what they can learn from that place.

David Archer: Yeah, and those are great attributes to have if you're visiting somewhere you're unfamiliar with. And I hope that group continues to grow.

I think there's also an element beyond that of personal affinity with a location in particular because of something in the way that people live there. And sometimes you know that in advance, and sometimes you don't, and that's kind of the fun of travel.

Now we're going to go to listen to your conversation with Steve Skadron, Campus Dean and Vice President at Colorado Mountain College.

Steve Skadron: I am Steve Skadron. I am the Campus Dean and Vice President at Colorado Mountain College.

Rodney Payne: And what was your background before your current role? What have you done here in Aspen?

Steve Skadron: I'm the former mayor of Aspen. My term was from 2013 to 2019. Mayor prior to the current mayor.

Rodney Payne: And you were mayor for six years. What made you run for office?

Steve Skadron: Prior to running, I had served on the Aspen City Council for six years. And I wanted to run for mayor because there was a certain toolkit the mayor has that I didn't have as a council member. And I had a clear vision about what I wanted the town to be, where I thought it should go. So I took a shot, and I won.

Rodney Payne: What were some of the main issues rolled up into that vision?

Steve Skadron: I talked a lot about appropriate development for mountain communities. Aspen's an attractive place, it attracts a lot of investment dollars. People come here attracted by a certain kind of value proposition, and the first thing they do when they arrive is want to change the place from the one that attracted them here in the first place.

I was really interested in the preservation of place. I was interested in diversifying our local economy away from boom-and-bust development cycles. And I was interested in transportation initiatives that would provide alternatives to single-occupancy vehicles.

Rodney Payne: Preservation of place is a really interesting concept. Did you find some success that other places could learn from during your term? What did you learn?

Steve Skadron: I had a prominent role in a group called the Colorado Association of Ski Towns, and it's 40 or so similar communities who get together periodically and discuss issues pertinent to resort towns. And I remember in those meetings, I used to say this publicly when I returned to Aspen in public meetings. The meetings invariably start with a comment like, "We don't want to be Aspen. Nobody wants to be Aspen." But at some point, they would turn to me and say, "How did you get that affordable housing plan done?" Nobody wants to be Aspen, but everybody wants to know how we did the things we did. So that was a lesson.

And your question is, what did I learn from other communities about things they've done? And I would respond by saying at least in my time, often Aspen was leading the conversation, which was equally frustrating.

Rodney Payne: What do you love about Aspen?

Steve Skadron: What do I love about Aspen? Rodney, it's funny, asking me that question today. Would elicit an answer, I think, differently than when I ran for mayor several years ago. What I love about Aspen, of course, is its intoxicating natural beauty. I love access to the mountains. I'm active on the trails and all the systems. I do all the things. And, of course, skiing in the winter.

Rodney Payne: What would you have said when you were running for mayor?

Steve Skadron: I wouldn't have shared the same frustrations I have with Aspen today.

If the follow-up question is what frustrates me about Aspen or what might I dislike: the concentration of wealth here is so extraordinary that at times it's breathtaking. I find that while Aspen benefits greatly in many ways – the tourist dollars support our bus system, we have a fantastic transportation infrastructure, and it supports a lot of the programming here and makes us the extraordinary place we are. So I say with deep appreciation, in one sense, for the concentration of wealth it brings with it great frustration as well because it erodes the sense of community because only a certain socio-economic category of an individual can actually live in Aspen.

Rodney Payne: So many destinations are probably starting to feel similar frustrations, whether it's wealth inequality or you know, whether that inequality's showing up in housing affordability or cost of living, or workforce shortages, or whatever the pain point is. What are some of the things you've experienced here in Aspen over the years?

Steve Skadron: This was always evident, but post-COVID, this has become more evident. And just walking through town, it's really interesting to observe how things have kind of evolved.

So I don't have actual numbers on this, but if I was to make an observation, it's almost as if the downtown core – where very well-to-do people would buy property – got so expensive that that group of people moved to a different part of the community, like into the West End, we call it here, and then forcing the people who used to buy in the West End into kind of the employee section of town where I live, and it's just interesting to walk through the parking lot in kind of the employee part of town, and where there once were pickups and broken down Jeeps, and maybe 4Runners, now you see Teslas and BMWs and Range Rovers. So that's just kind of the evolution of the town. And then, of course, those of us who lived in

workforce housing are now living 30 or 40 or 50 miles down the valley. So, that's the way it goes.

Rodney Payne: We're seeing more and more places respond to these types of pressures, and they're often interrelated. And that response may come from policymakers, or from the people who have traditionally been responsible for promoting tourism. They're reacting to resident pressure to pump the brakes a little bit and look for levers that we can pull. Aspen has recently built a destination management plan to start looking at the community's priorities and talk to everyone here and surface actions and things we could be doing. What's your perspective on that, from a former policymaker for most of your career? Where do you think we find agency in attempting to find balance?

Steve Skadron: This is a hard question, this balance between, appropriate promotion of tourism weighed against the preservation of place. And it's a legitimate argument. What I've learned is that the tension is found between locals themselves. Tourism is an important economic driver, yet so is a kind of preservation of the community. I think to be aware of that tension, should help inform policy to some degree. I think you could actually make an argument to promote less. You know, there was a shift from promoting tourism to promoting destination management. But I'm not entirely convinced that renaming the promotion, re-prioritizing what happens, what a tourist should do once they get here, addresses the core issue.

Rodney Payne: You think we've got to look at the demand side and look for levers to try to optimize that?

Steve Skadron: I think worth exploring or investigating might be a more aggressive type of campaigning or marketing. Even something like saying, maybe this isn't the place for you.

Rodney Payne: Who do you think the perfect visitor for Aspen is? What sort of values do they have?

Steve Skadron: That's actually an easy question for me. And it gets down to, what kind of values visitors have. It's almost the same question as what kind of values should a local have. And I can answer that. After many, many

years and a lot of debate. And the question I would ask is, what's a local? You know, that's debated. What's a local?

Can you answer that? I don't want to put you on the spot. How would you define it?

Rodney Payne: Everywhere I've lived because I've frequented mountain towns in my misspent youth as well. And we always have that debate, right? Whether it's in Whistler or Revelstoke or Sun Valley.

How long do you have to live there to be a local, right? Is it second generation? Is it first generation? You know, is it 10 years? My new definition is, were you here during the pandemic?

Steve Skadron: It's funny, all the years at city council when we do public comment, citizens would come and start their comments by saying, I've lived in Aspen for five years.

Or I've been in Aspen for 51 years. I don't think it's a matter of time. And oftentimes some of the 50-year guys are more difficult than the two-year people. I remember one of my favourite letters to the editor was, a young lady had written, she said, I am outta here! Because this restaurant closed, and this restaurant closed. She said, and when I moved here – and it was like three years earlier – she goes, this isn't the Aspen I remember when I moved here. And she'd been all over here like two and a half years.

Now, I think a local is someone who puts the place before themselves. That's a local. Someone who puts the community before themselves. So you see a traffic problem, you say, what am I doing to solve this traffic problem? You see a snicker bar wrapper blown on the ground, you bend over and pick it up. I think it's something simple like that.

Rodney Payne: And you think it's possible for us to expect that of visitors as well?

Steve Skadron: Is it possible to expect that? Absolutely, it's possible to expect that. And I think that can be crafted into a campaign. And I think a place that really loves itself, isn't afraid to say, we're this kind of place. Tourists will come here and do these kind of things. Perhaps we're not for everybody.

Think twice about coming here before you do.

Rodney Payne: You're very optimistic about creating a circular economy. What is that? And why is it so important?

Steve Skadron: Yeah, I describe it this way. Right now, for the most part, we live in a linear economy. For instance, you buy a jacket, you wear it, throw it out and go buy a new one.

A circular economy gives the jacket a second life. And some of the big retailers have been at the forefront of this. I give credit to Patagonia. Their program is called Worn Wear, but the principle is wear, repair, repeat. So that's a circular economy. Wear a jacket, you repair it, and then you wear it again, or you post it for resale and let someone else.

Rodney Payne: Yeah, what Patagonia is doing is really quite inspirational. They just had one of the Re-Fests – I don't know if they had that here as well – but they're running Re-Fests all over the world and helping people to understand that at different markets.

Steve Skadron: So, Rodney, the circular economy ties into an initiative I started back in 2014. I was really proud of it. It was called the Uphill Economy Initiative. There are some days on our mountains where there are more people going uphill than are going downhill. And I do all that stuff. I get up at 6 a. m. and go hike up the mountain in the morning and ski down. I've been doing it for 25 years.

And I was just watching what was happening around this explosion in uphill fitness. And there's a generation that was out there before I was doing it, but back in the day, it was only a handful of people who did it. And it's hard. You get up early, it's cold. It's pitch black. But now it's become a real social movement. Kind of the way, maybe, marathon running was back in the 90s. There were people, first, you were nutty and then everybody did it. So I saw the economic opportunity around that and I built a policy around it.

Rodney Payne: I like the parallel between earning your turn and fast consumerism. It's, there's a nice parallel there.

We've been hearing a lot about the circular economy and particularly in Europe with some of the people we've spoken to. In Rotterdam a few

weeks ago, we were interviewing the lady who runs Blue City, which is an amazing circularity hub that's been built in this crazy old biodome, and it was sort of a water park built under a huge glass roof and it was due to be knocked down and they managed to snag it right on the waterfront there. It could have been, you know, hundreds of millions of dollars worth of apartments. They managed to get it, and they've reused it, and they've turned it into a hub where there are about 55 startups all interrelated.

Steve Skadron: Yeah, fantastic.

Rodney Payne: Yeah, it's really special. How do you see some of these principles, the circular economy principles coming to life in North America?

Steve Skadron: Yeah, let me comment on something we're doing at Colorado Mountain College because I'm excited about this. So I mentioned I started this Uphill Economy Initiative, and it became a conversation I was having with our governor, Hickenlooper, now Senator Hickenlooper's office at the time.

And I made a number of trips to Denver to the Economic Development and National Trade Team, and through our sister city relationships, I knocked on doors in Europe, and I had this vision to turn Aspen and the Roaring Fork Valley into kind of the Silicon Valley of this Uphill Initiative.

The concept was to have these European brands who are at the forefront of this initiative kind of on our doors. And we would do kind of the white-collar sciences here. You could test your new skin glue by going uphill on a mountain. And we could perhaps, throughout the western slope, down valley and the rest of the western slope, you could do warehousing and some of these other business aspects that couldn't possibly happen in Aspen.

And it became this kind of broader conversation with the western slope, and I saw an opportunity with three airports here out in Grand Junction. After I was term-limited mayor, I joined Colorado Mountain College, and I brought the program over. And we worked for a couple of years developing a program we're calling Make It Here. It's evolved into a soft goods

manufacturing program, but it's directly rooted in the Uphill Economy Initiative.

And starting this fall, we'll be introducing a certificate – we're going to give it a shot – that's based on kind of a number of principles that were tied to this Uphill Initiative, that I believe are critical to people living in mountain communities. This was an effort, again, to kind of diversify our economy away from this real estate boom and bust development cycles, as I said before. It's tied to soft goods manufacturing. So that means if you tear your jacket, you can learn how to fix it. So instead of throwing away and buying a new one, you repair your jacket. It's tied to supply chain management. I've been a part of this program in the last couple of years. Nothing more important than understanding how to source your stuff. Part of the program is entrepreneurship. So, if you wanted to learn these tactile skills and open your own shop, or perhaps go to work for Patagonia's Worn Wear Program, you understand all these principles about soft goods.

It has to do with sustainable development or circular economy. Because the program, again, as we said, gives garments a second life. At Colorado Mountain College, right now at the Aspen campus, we have in the basement a collection of sewing machines dedicated to soft goods manufacturing, got certified by the state, and we're going to have this official certificate that at least is an introduction or a start to things communities like ours can do to embrace this concept.

Rodney Payne: How's that been received by the people who hear about it or experience it directly? Is there a good reaction? Do you find it not just educative and that it also changes values?

Steve Skadron: That's exactly what it does. It's a value proposition. So the college I work with, Colorado Mountain College, is in a number of towns like Aspen. It's up in Steamboat, and over in Vail, and Breckenridge has a campus. It goes out to Rifle, Colorado. And this gets back to, like, the kind of people who live in these communities. At our Steamboat campus, a community not too dissimilar to this one, Steamboat has an action sports

industry program, so if you want to learn how to make a snowboard, you can learn this hard goods manufacturing up at Steamboat.

Over at our Leadville campus, you can learn snow sciences, you want to be an Avi guide, or you want to learn how to run a snowcat and come work for the Aspen Skiing Company. And I thought the Roaring Fork Valley could be the third leg of this mountain triangle we have. So that's where we introduced the soft goods side, we have hard goods Steamboat, we have snow sciences in Leadville. And then Roaring Fork Valley will have this soft goods side, but that's entirely about training a generation with a set of skills that can embrace the values of place. Because back in the day, nobody moved to a place like Aspen for a career move.

You moved here because you didn't fit in, or you moved here to get away, or you moved here because you loved the mountains, and then you found a way.

But now, Aspen in many ways is kind of a bedroom community to Silicon Valley, or New York City. So that's the embrace of the values.

Rodney Payne: It's crazy when you put it like that.

Steve Skadron: Yeah.

Rodney Payne: How do you think tourism in Aspen can play into your hopes for a circular economy? How does tourism become non-linear?

Steve Skadron: So when I showed up in town, and I showed up here, I was 30-ish when I showed up, 32, early 30s. And I had a master's degree, I had an MBA, and I had some professional work experience. I showed up and I had three jobs. And one of them was at Aspen Sports in town. Local ski shop. And a guy, Ernie Fairwald, was still around town, he owned the shop at the time. And Ernie used to do this pre-season rally with all the shop employees. And to this day, when I see Ernie, I tell him this story all the time. I'm a rookie in town, Ernie said, he said these words, "They want to be you. Never forget that, they want to be you."

You show up with your family, your buddies, on your ski trip. And you walk into a ski shop, you got the new skis and the boots, and you got guys with long hair, and you're hanging out, and everybody's talking about how

awesome the powder is. And they start talking the lingo. And some guy says, you know, dude, how's the fresh pow? And you're thinking, doesn't exactly fit. But they want to be you.

So that's the answer. That's what I would say. How can tourists share these priorities? So I think if locals remember they want to be you, tourists follow the locals is what happens.

Rodney Payne: Yeah. So another way to put that would be that we can use tourism to export values.

Steve Skadron: Yeah, absolutely.

Rodney Payne: Yeah, I really like it. If people can see the circular economy here in place, in regards to soft goods, and maybe they go and get their jacket repaired, and see that it's perfect, maybe, that changes their mind just a little bit.

Steve Skadron: Right, exactly.

Rodney Payne: Yeah. A common theme that we've seen through a lot of conversations is using different experiences like that, even though they seem really small, to let people experience a different way of living.

Steve Skadron: Yeah.

Rodney Payne: Although tourism, you know, it's hard to make the practice itself non-linear. It can show people a different way and maybe change minds rather than just beating them over the head with it, and what we've been trying for the last few decades.

Are things moving fast enough for you?

Steve Skadron: Thank you for the question. The answer is no. Things are not moving fast enough. And just in this valley alone, my role as Dean of the college takes me down the valley. I'm responsible for a region. And watching what's happening in the Roaring Fork Valley itself, outside of Aspen is, it's kind of exciting and discouraging at the time. It's the rate of development and the amount of growth and the cost of properties and the realities of living in this place. It's shocking a little bit. So, no, it's not happening fast enough. And, I don't mind people come live here. They

should. It's fantastic and the more people who experience this, the more people will promote its values.

What frustrates me is, and I referred to this earlier, is this clash of values. In 2015, I think it was 2015, in my role as mayor, I was invited to Paris. It was COP 21. We had just completed in this town converting our electric utility to run on 100% renewables. We got noted for that. I think we're the second city in the country to do it.

You want to take a guess at the first, by chance, what was the very first? Convert their utility to run on renewables? I'll tell you who it was, it was Burlington, Vermont in the-

Rodney Payne: Yeah I was going to guess Vermont.

Steve Skadron: Bernie Sanders was mayor at the time. So we got it done in 2015 and it was the, it was the kind of third of three mayors to work on this and I had been on council for eight of the ten years of this program, but we got it done kind of on time, on schedule. It was a ten-year window. And I was invited to COP 21. That's where Obama was president, the 195 nations signed the agreement, and I was extended this invitation from, there was a group of people, there was a side event. It was hosted by Mayor Hidalgo of Paris and Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York City.

And I had sat on a number of panels talking like this about how, how we in this town accomplished this goal. And I remember following one of the interviews, I think it was the CBC from Canada, that asked a similar question. They said, what's the hardest thing you're dealing with in Aspen? And the response, the predictable response, is something like affordable housing, it's so expensive to live there, or climate change, because we've lost 30 days of winter since 1985. But it's not what I said. What I said was the real challenge Aspen faces is a clash of values. People are attracted, come to Aspen because of its value proposition. But once they get here, they want to change it from the very place that attracted them here in the first place. That's the greatest frustration I have.

So when you say, is it happening fast enough? It's a real embrace of the value proposition of places like this that isn't happening fast enough, I think.

Rodney Payne: We're dancing around various issues that are a symptom of our global economy, where tourism is a part of that economy and attracts the wealthiest people, who can afford to travel. And the environmental issues, a lot of the social issues around housing and affordability, and some of the economic issues around the income divide, they tend to be quite interconnected.

In relation to the circular economy or other principles like the doughnut economy or degrowth, as we sort of search for new models, how do you see all of that fitting together?

Steve Skadron: Two things come to mind about interconnectedness. I remember sitting on a panel, I think it was in Mammoth, California, and it was an environmental panel, and I was with the CEO of Squaw Valley, and another of their business leaders. And the audience was, a kind of pro-environmental caucus that was sitting in the room. Saying something like, If I hear one more time that we need to save the world, through these cliches, I said, I'm gonna scream. The fact is that the wrong people are sitting in the room.

So you talk about interconnectedness. I wonder if so many of these conversations are speaking to the wrong audience. So the fact is, until we get the other 50% of the country involved in the conversation, we're stuck. After I came back from Paris, we put together a program based on something Michael Bloomberg had started. It was called the International – I may forget these names exactly, it's been a while – International Conference of Mayors, and I turned to my staff and I said, I want to put together the Colorado Conference of Mayors.

And we put together a Colorado version of this international program that Michael Bloomberg had started. And it led to a statewide conversation. Tom Vilsack was there, Tom Vilsack was Obama's Ag Secretary. I believe he's currently Biden's Ag secretary, but he, prior to that, he was the

governor of Iowa and remember Governor Vilsack saying he and I were talking and he said, you know, if I walked around Iowa talking to the farmers and I mentioned climate change, he said they wouldn't want to talk to me, but if I talked about weather variability, we'd chat for hours. So perhaps, the question about interconnectedness. Maybe it's more, it has to do with the conversation we're having.

Rodney Payne:

One of the things that keeps me really optimistic about the travel industry, is we may be one of the only industries that can showcase something. And instead of trying to convince people with words, we can show people a much more exciting and net-better way of doing things. And less about convincing and more about, just allowing people to experience things.

TRANSFORMATIONAL TRAVEL

And I think that's really true for what you're working on here, right? And you alluded to it a few times. If people can come here and experience that and maybe their values just change, just a little bit.

Steve Skadron: A little bit. Yeah.

Can I comment on one more thing about the interconnectedness? I want to go back to this Colorado Mountain College soft goods manufacturing certificate we're introducing.

When I had to sell this to the college and knock on doors and talk to community groups, it had to do with re-imagining, this notion of re-imagine. And at the time we were calling it Make It Here, local manufacturing. So this Make It Here program was about envisioning a new dynamic between next-generation entrepreneurs and existing manufacturers in outdoor recreation. It was all tied to the outdoor rec industry. And the program thinks about a new business model. Where we would grow without being dependent upon new materials to make things.

So, what I was really discussing was a new manufacturing ecosystem that I thought was befitting Colorado's outdoor rec industry. And that ties very closely to what you said about showing rather than imposing or teaching.

Rodney Payne: Yeah, yeah, I really like it. When we think about the pressure that tourism puts on a place, one of the most obvious signs that there's a lot of people visiting is congestion. And when we were working with the local authorities here to help build a destination management plan, one of the things that repeatedly came up were challenges around transportation issues. What are some of the transportation solutions that you've seen work well here in Aspen?

Steve Skadron: The thing I was most proud of when I served as mayor was a transportation initiative we introduced. We created a program called the Aspen Mobility Lab. And this is really a thoughtful, prudent program to offer transportation alternatives to the community to get people out of their single-occupancy vehicles. So what we proposed was a – I love this and I think it's really smart. What we proposed was a three-month experiment to introduce what the future of transportation looked like. Aspen deals with a significant congestion problem. There's really, essentially one way in and one way out.

And the proposal on the table is to bulldoze open space and make a straight shot to Main Street, because right now, the historic entrance, there's a couple of S curves that gets you over to Main Street. So, it's been a 40-year battle, and I felt that if you view the problem through the lens of not enough capacity, it leads to a build more solution. It's more lanes and more parking garages, which ultimately drives more traffic. So if the problem is viewed through the lens of too many cars, it leads you to a reduce-the-number-of-cars solution.

So I created this program, the X Mobility Lab, that would provide alternatives to single occupancy vehicles. It was never about eliminating cars. We did some numbers and we figured every day if we could get X number of cars, a handful, 800 cars or something off the road, traffic could flow freely. And we had been to Silicon Valley a number of times, we worked about a couple years on this, two and a half years, spent about half a million dollars of public money and we created a program that was probably the world's first fully integrated, meaning that there were a

number of transportation modes. At that time autonomous cars were becoming, was all the rage, as they still are. E-bikes were, hadn't yet really hit the marketplace. So, I knocked on some doors in Silicon Valley and I kind of offered them our entire community. Where other cities had taken a street. So let's give this one street to autonomous cars. Or, you know, Pittsburgh had done something with Waymo. But we had this first, like, fully integrated program where there was a number of different transportation modes working in unison. It was a semi-autonomous kind of trolley car running from downtown over to the music tent on the other side of town. It was a fleet of geo-fenced e-bikes where people could try this new rage in e-bikes right around town. Geofenced because we didn't want a free program to compete against the rental bike shops. We tried to be really careful about how we're doing this. We introduced a whole bunch of new creative thinking that Silicon Valley was working on.

The second part of it was that it was a comprehensive program, meaning it was the entire community, as I said, it wasn't one street. So a number of modes working throughout the entire community that was entirely data-driven. We talked to the data companies. I think I sat down with some leadership at Verizon and some other small entrepreneurs who had these technologies that sit on light poles and they count traffic and they understand how to move things around.

And what I hoped to do was this three-month experiment where we could hand over this data set to future leadership where they could say, here's how we can address Aspen's transportation program in a kind of values-based proposition.

The first year and a half of that program, the Aspen Institute agreed to work with us and we put together kind of a transportation committee of 30 locals who met for 18 months to develop a values-based transportation program. So we had community tie-in, we brought in world's biggest thinkers on transportation, the city threw in money, I think some private citizens threw in money, the Aspen Institute was gracious to host these programs, and we developed that, a values-based transportation program. I created the public

policy to go around it, and we were close, and then I was term-limited, and then I, and I was the champion of this program, and it kind of got shelved. So, parts of it are rolling out, but, there you go.

Rodney Payne: Yeah, political cycles make long-term solutions really challenging right when you lose the champion, but hopefully some of the learning from that filters through and some of the data catches on, right?

Steve Skadron: Yeah, yeah. I hope. Yeah, Rodney, I don't know about that. I was, I was a guy with an idea and I stood up in front of the community. I made up the whole thing, just like I made up this whole uphill economy thing that's become a soft goods manufacturing. Maybe we can address the circularity program with this.

Ultimately, it comes down to political will. This came up at our chamber board meeting last week. I said, when it comes down to it, communities get what they deserve. And the fact is, with that mobility program, I'm not really sure people want to get out of their cars. They complain about the transportation. They complain about the congestion. But they want me to get out of my car, so I'll get out of their way so they can get to where they're going faster. That gets back to what's a local. So if you're really a local, what are you doing, what are you doing, Rodney, to fix the transportation problem?

I mean, you can let the board of politicians introduce the policies, but it comes down to it, what are you doing? And people are giving e-bikes a shot and things, but when it comes down to it with cars, people are building these houses with two- and three-car garages, and tourists are coming and renting their cars from the airport.

Rodney Payne: Are you worried about climate change?

Steve Skadron: It's not the climate change part that makes me worried. It's people's values that worry me. It's a default to what's easiest, not what's best. That worries me.

Rodney Payne: What gives you hope?

Steve Skadron: What gives me hope are programs like the circularity that we talked about, because there's a whole generation of consumers that

wants to do things differently than prior generations have. So I have hope that perhaps some of the things we've done may be improved on by the next generation.

Rodney Payne: Is there anything else you want to tell me? What can the world learn from Aspen?

Steve Skadron: Aspen's right or wrong, whether you like it or not, whether the wealthiest people in the world live here, or the locals struggle to make it, Aspen did something.

Aspen decided what it wanted to be and it got it done. Some things are great, some things didn't work, but at least Aspen did it. And I would encourage other communities like this one to do something. To decide. Elect the people who can deliver the policies and get something done. Because if you don't, it gets done for you.

Rodney Payne: I really appreciate you coming to spend an hour the park. It's a lovely sunny day out here, and know you've got a lot going on. Thank you.