

# COVID-19 response in Whistler

A coordinated community approach



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Resort Municipality of Whistler  
Whistler Blackcomb  
Tourism Whistler  
Whistler Chamber of Commerce



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## OVERVIEW

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) has planned and coordinated with Whistler Blackcomb, Tourism Whistler and the Whistler Chamber of Commerce to manage efforts and communications related to COVID-19 response and recovery in Whistler.

Whistler's tourism-based economy presents some challenges when it comes to managing through a pandemic. Namely, an economy reliant on visitors and a young seasonal workforce.

Almost all businesses in Whistler has had to adjust their offerings to meet the changes in visitation since the start of the pandemic. In 2019, approximately 3 million people visited Whistler with 45 percent of those visits in winter and 55 per cent in the summer months. In 2020 and early 2021, this number decreased dramatically and tourism offerings had to pivot toward servicing primarily regional visitors (within B.C. and primarily the Vancouver Lower Mainland.)

Whistler's proximity to Vancouver has long made it a popular destination for lower mainlanders, for skiing, weekend getaways and day trips. Even so, occupancy in Whistler is significantly reduced due to COVID-19. To date (November 2020 to January 2021), room nights in Whistler are down more than 60 percent this season with 86 percent of overnight visitors to Whistler from the BC market. Mobility data provided by Destination BC indicates the Vancouver Coast & Mountain Region has been experiencing a continued decline in interprovincial visitors throughout the pandemic, with December visits down 66 percent - the lowest numbers our region has seen since recreational travel resumed in late June.

Nearly all businesses in Whistler rely on a young, seasonal workforce who are in Whistler primarily for the experience of living in a fun, vibrant mountain town. Many seasonal employees do not have access to secure, long-term housing and share accommodation in private residences, many in shared rooms. Almost all are away from any immediate family members and do not have BC MSP, instead relying on private travel insurance.

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Seasonal employees are one demographic of Whistler’s full-time, year-round population of 13,000 residents who call Whistler home. Whistler also has a significant number of families who live in high density resident-restricted housing or shared housing. Additionally, there are tight-knit communities in Whistler of foreign workers who live together in shared housing and socialize together as many are also away from family connections while working in Whistler.

These considerations have demanded a measured and holistic approach to pandemic management, planning and response in Whistler.

## **COMMUNITY APPROACH TO COVID-19 IN WHISTLER**

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the leadership and communications leads for the RMOW, Whistler Blackcomb, Tourism Whistler and Whistler Chamber met regularly to discuss resort and organizational updates and challenges. These meetings set the foundation for an inter-organizational response to COVID-19.

Each organization has strong connections to other organizations within the community such as the Hotel Association of Whistler, the Restaurant Association of Whistler, Whistler Community Services Society, School District 48, Sea to Sky Divisions of Family Practice, the Whistler Medical Centre and RCMP. Because of these connections, information on COVID response and recovery can be shared quickly and required actions can be coordinated effectively.

Below is a summary of the COVID-19 response plan in Whistler as of February 15, 2021. It is organized into four sections: 1) communications, 2) operations, 3) community health, wellbeing and housing and 4) enforcement measures. What is outlined is the response to the immediate needs in the community. A separate but related effort focused on

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Whistler's long-term recovery, is running parallel to this plan but is not detailed in this document.

This plan is a living document and will continue to be improved as each organization continues to learn and adapt to what is required for COVID-19 safety in Whistler. It is also important to note that this plan is not exhaustive and does not capture all the various safety measures being implemented throughout the community by individuals and local businesses.

### Communications

Action/ Communication	Lead organizations	Description	Timing
Emergency Operations Centre	RMOW	Provided initial response, communications and contingency planning for COVID-19 pandemic	March to July 2020
Business communications	RMOW/Tourism Whistler/ Whistler Chamber/ Whistler Blackcomb	<p>The Whistler Chamber has been sharing provincial and federal business support resources in addition to hosting virtual events which have included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A webinar on the Small and Medium Sized Business Recovery Grant program that provides fully funded grants to businesses to ensure they have the support they need during and beyond COVID-19. The Whistler Chamber, the Resort Municipality of Whistler and the Ministry of Jobs, Economic Recovery and Innovation for the Province of British Columbia joined together to help break down how the program works, the criteria, eligibility and more.</li><li>• Whistler Chamber CEO Melissa Pace held a Zoom session with VCH's Dr. John Harding to talk to businesses about COVID-19 safety plans, when employees should be tested and other COVID-19 questions which has had over 1,300 views.</li><li>• Most recently, the Whistler Chamber held a virtual update with WorkSafeBC and go2HR to provide businesses with support and resources for updating their COVID-19 safety plans.</li></ul>	Ongoing

		<p>To ensure all businesses and frontline employees have the tools they need to communicate Whistler's COVID-19 safety protocols to visitors, Tourism Whistler created a COVID-19 information &amp; resources hub for all Whistler businesses on its <a href="#">member website</a> (a dedicated microsite for Tourism Whistler members).</p> <p>Tourism Whistler has also held weekly, then bi-weekly, and now monthly virtual meetings with the local business community to discuss ongoing COVID-19 response and recovery efforts in the resort.</p> <p>The Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) coordinated efforts to ensure all Whistler businesses take a proactive approach to implementing required COVID-19 safety protocols to manage risk – both for the community and visitors alike. The RMOW created a <a href="#">Best Practices Toolkit</a> for local businesses at <a href="#">whistler.ca/SafeRestart</a> and Tourism Whistler and the Whistler Chamber have promoted these resources to members to encourage alignment across the resort. The RMOW, Tourism Whistler and the Whistler Chamber of Commerce have been messaging to all businesses the importance of keeping COVID-19 safety plans up to date at all times.</p>	
Community Conversations and Collaborative Recovery Response	RMOW facilitated discussions with community members and community leaders	<p>Brought together community members through virtual community meetings that took place on Zoom to discuss COVID-19 experiences to surface important considerations for response and recovery.</p> <p>The Whistler Recovery Working Group is comprised of 25 leaders and community members and has been meeting monthly since August to identify, collaborate and coordinate responses needed to deal with the local impacts of the pandemic. The responses have ranged from organizing better access to mental health resources and community wellbeing events to supporting peer learning for local businesses needing to pivot to starting to map a path for a strategic recovery for sustainable tourism.</p>	July 2020 and August 2020 to present



Community Focused COVID-19 Updates	RMOW	The RMOW's weekly COVID-19 update has collated community resources on COVID-19 for the community such as community services, healthcare, COVID-19 testing resources and COVID-safe events.	Ongoing
COVID-19 is not on Vacation Campaign	RMOW/ Tourism Whistler	<p>Focused on reminding tourists of the need to adhere to COVID-19 guidelines and protocols, the campaign reminded visitors through signage and advertising that while they might be on vacation, COVID-19 is not.</p> <p>The RMOW and Tourism Whistler developed a set of Travel Manners for visitors to highlight Whistler's COVID-19 safety protocols. Whistler's <a href="#">Travel Manners</a> are a customized version of Dr. Bonnie Henry's Travel Manners and feature Whistler-specific messaging and guidance to encourage compliance and responsible travel. Whistler's Travel Manners have been communicated to visitors via posters throughout Whistler Village, email communications and social media.</p>	June to September 2020
Fall mask campaign and policy for municipal facilities	RMOW/Whistler Blackcomb/ Whistler Chamber/ Tourism Whistler	The Resort Partners, along with prominent community members joined together for a print and digital campaign to share why, "In Whistler, we wear masks...." The campaign was launched in advance of a mandatory mask policy in RMOW facilities and also served to support local businesses that had mandated mandatory mask policies.	October 2020 to January 2021
Community Zoom information session	RMOW	The Resort Municipality of Whistler held a community information session on Zoom on January 21 that to date has had 2,000 views in addition to more than 500 people attending the session. The session brought together VCH's Medical Health Officer, local doctors, School District 48 superintendent and local leaders to provide information and answer community members' questions about COVID-19 in Whistler.	January 21, 2021
Visitor communications	Tourism Whistler/ Whistler Blackcomb/ RMOW	<p>Tourism Whistler suspended all marketing campaigns from March through June and November to present, and has been focusing its messaging in owned channels (ex. social media) on staying local and dreaming of future travel when the time is right.</p> <p>Tourism Whistler call centre staff are informing all potential visitors that</p>	Ongoing

		<p>there is currently an advisory in place against non-essential travel into and throughout B.C.</p> <p>Whistler Blackcomb has suspended all online marketing efforts and has focused its social media channels on encouraging guests and community members to follow Whistler Blackcomb's on-mountain health and safety protocols and public health guidance.</p> <p>In advance of arrival, Whistler Blackcomb guests are provided with details on its on-mountain health and safety protocols.</p> <p>When the COVID-19 pandemic first began, Tourism Whistler created an information and resources hub for travelers on <a href="https://www.whistler.com">whistler.com</a> – the official destination website for Whistler. The page features the latest local, provincial and federal updates related to tourism and travel and has prominently featured the province's non-essential travel advisory since it was reinstated in early November 2020. Recently, the page has been updated to include messaging from the <i>Ski BC Strong</i> and <i>Ski Well, Be Well</i> campaigns, including <i>Guidelines for a Safe and Responsible Visit</i> to outline our community's expectations of visitors who choose to visit during this time. To date, the page has received almost 250,000 page views and is among the top visited pages on <a href="https://www.whistler.com">whistler.com</a>.</p> <p>The Whistler Insider Blog is one of Tourism Whistler's most effective tools for communicating messaging to visitors. When tourism returned to Whistler this summer, Tourism Whistler created a dedicated <a href="#">Know Before You Go</a> category for Whistler Insider blogs to outline the resort's COVID-19 safety protocols and visitor best practices. Highlights include blogs featuring guidance for <a href="#">park</a> and <a href="#">trail</a> etiquette, <a href="#">safe dining</a>, and an overview of <a href="#">Whistler Blackcomb's updated protocols</a> for skiing and snowboarding. Tourism Whistler has developed 13 Know Before You Go blogs since May which have seen a combined total of 46,661 views.</p> <p>Tourism Whistler also created a <a href="#">series of videos</a> for summer and winter</p>	
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		<p>highlighting new COVID-19 safety protocols for accommodations, restaurants, retail, parks and Whistler Village to showcase physical distancing, mask wearing, plexiglass barriers, hand sanitizer stations, etc.</p> <p>Tourism Whistler manages the <a href="#">Whistler Visitor Information Centre</a>, Whistler.com Central Reservations (Whistler's official source for visitor information and bookings) and <a href="#">Ask Whistler</a>, a mobile live chat service to provide visitors with resort information. The frontline teams manning all three of the channels have been provided with messaging and tools (ex. posters and flatsheets) to communicate Whistler's COVID-19 safety protocols directly to visitors.</p>	
Doors Open Directory	Tourism Whistler	<p>In late June when British Columbia entered Phase 3 of the BC Restart Plan and safe recreational travel was once again permitted, Tourism Whistler worked with our business community to develop the <a href="#">Whistler Doors Open Directory</a>. The Doors Open Directory displays what businesses are open in Whistler, how they have modified their operations in response to COVID-19, and most importantly, what safety protocols each business has put in place to protect customers and employees. The Doors Open Directory has received approximately 124,000 page views to date and has been regularly promoted to visitors in Tourism Whistler's marketing efforts, including posters, print ads, consumer emails, social media posts and third-party sponsored content placements.</p>	March and ongoing
Adventure Differently BC Summer Recovery Campaign	Tourism Whistler	<p>When recreational travel resumed in BC in late June, Whistler wanted to ensure its return to tourism was managed safely and carefully, balancing the needs of our guests, businesses, residents and the environment. Tourism Whistler's BC Summer Recovery Campaign redefined what it means to <a href="#">Adventure Differently</a> in a COVID-19 world, and sought to ensure our guests felt invited and secure in returning to Whistler, but asked them to do so thoughtfully and mindfully and with a respect for the current situation. We developed a set of four <a href="#">Adventure Differently</a> pillars to highlight Whistler's safety protocols and to act as guidelines for the changes we ask of everyone</p>	July to October 2020

		who spends time in the resort during the pandemic.	
Ski Community Mobilization/Education campaign	RMOW/Tourism Whistler/ Whistler Blackcomb/Whistler Chamber of Commerce/Gibbons Group	Whistler is one of the communities participating in an industry-government collaboration on minimizing the risk of COVID-19 transmission in ski communities. This plan will include targeted communications aimed at the 20 to 30-something age group as noted below.	February 2021 and ongoing
Young adult communications campaign	RMOW/ Whistler Chamber/ Tourism Whistler/ Whistler Blackcomb	<p>The Resort Municipality of Whistler has executed a comprehensive COVID-19 communications plan aimed at the 20 to 30-something age group. This includes radio PSAs, local newspaper ads, a flat sheet with COVID-19 prevention and self-isolation information and a customized Whistler self-isolation guide which links to local social services resources. This has been shared with businesses through Tourism Whistler and the Whistler Chamber.</p> <p>Resort partners have worked with local business Gibbons, which owns several popular local bars, on customized communications for young people working primarily in front line positions to encourage them to adopt behaviours that will help “save our season.”</p> <p>Additionally, resort partners are sharing CWSAA materials on social media.</p>	January 2021 and ongoing

## Operations

Weekly Resort Partners Calls	RMOW/Tourism Whistler/ Whistler Chamber	Resort partners have held weekly calls since the start of the pandemic to share operational updates, coordinate communications and information on COVID response in the respective operations.	Ongoing
Summer Parks Planning	RMOW	Restrictions on travel saw a significant number of visitors to Whistler’s parks in 2020. The summer parks planning group developed operational measures to manage demand and communicate to local visitors and lower mainland visitors through highway signage, social media and radio and newspaper ads the need to follow COVID-19 guidelines and health orders. The RMOW Festival, Animation and Events team has been constantly adjusting planned entertainment in Whistler due to COVID restrictions. This work was operational April through September 2020 and has shifted to a planning item January through April 2021.	April-September 2020

Whistler Blackcomb Summer Operations	Whistler Blackcomb	Whistler Blackcomb's summer operations included COVID-19 protocols and procedures that would form the foundation for the winter 2020.21 season including but not limited to: mandatory face coverings, physical distancing, and cashless transactions.	Summer Season 2020
Reservation system for Whistler Blackcomb	Whistler Blackcomb	Whistler Blackcomb has worked with Vancouver Coastal Health on lift loading and gondola protocols which include mandatory mask-wearing in lift and gondola lines and on the mountain in addition to limiting upload capacity by enforcing physical distancing in lines and allowing household cohorts only on each gondola or chairlift. There is also a reservation system for on-mountain dining which significantly limits capacity in restaurants. Lift lineups are directly related to physical distancing requirements, limited upload capacity due to household cohorts and snow conditions such as powder days, they are not indicative of higher visitor numbers or overnight stays in Whistler.	Winter Season 2020/2021
Lift and gondola line-up management	Whistler Blackcomb	Whistler Blackcomb has leadership personnel at all base areas each morning to ensure compliance with face covering and physical distancing requirements, and to oversee the overall compliance management throughout each base area. Leadership personnel are trained in de-escalation techniques and do have the authority to deny access to any guest unwilling to wear a face covering. In addition, Whistler Blackcomb's Resort Associates and volunteer mountain hosts are stationed at the base areas each morning from opening to noon to support mask and physical distancing compliance. Ample signage exists to notify guests of all relevant policies.	Winter Season 2020/2021
On-mountain safety	Whistler Blackcomb	<p>Whistler Blackcomb uses its public address system at all base areas and on-mountain lifts to remind guests of Whistler Blackcomb's face covering and physical distancing requirements.</p> <p>In conjunction with its face covering requirements, Whistler Blackcomb does not allow food or drink to be consumed in any base area lift lines or on-mountain lifts.</p> <p>In conjunction with its face covering and physical distancing requirements, Whistler Blackcomb does not allow guests to join parties already in its mazes.</p> <p>Whistler Blackcomb ski patrol are scheduled at on-mountain lifts to enforce face covering and physical distancing requirements.</p> <p>All Whistler Blackcomb staff in uniform are empowered to enforce mask compliance, particularly in any lift line, base area and on-mountain where congestion may be occurring.</p>	Ongoing

<b>Business Safety Plans</b>	<b>Whistler Chamber/ RMOW</b>	<p>The Whistler Chamber has provided online resources for businesses to update their COVID-19 safety plans and shared with their membership the importance of communicating to their employees the necessity of adhering to COVID-19 public health orders.</p> <p>The Whistler Chamber has also completed and made available video interviews with Vancouver Coastal Health and WorksafeBC to provide up to date information on what health inspectors are seeing while doing inspections of Whistler businesses.</p>	<b>Ongoing</b>
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## Community Health, Well-Being and Housing

<b>Whistler Blackcomb Staff Housing</b>	<b>Whistler Blackcomb</b>	<p>Employees in Whistler Blackcomb staff housing must comply with health and safety protocols. Inside staff housing, Whistler Blackcomb has closed communal areas to reduce potential transmission of COVID-19.</p> <p>Whistler Blackcomb has dedicated staff housing units for employees who are required to self-isolate and/or quarantine as per provincial health guidance.</p> <p>Whistler Blackcomb staff housing includes “employee navigators” who are able to regularly communicate public health guidance to employees and are available to provide assistance and direction to employees with questions about public health guidance.</p>	<b>Ongoing</b>
<b>Food bank support</b>	<b>WCSS/ RMOW</b>	<p>The RMOW worked with WCSS to find a larger space as demand for Food Bank services exploded in March 2020 due to the closure of Whistler Blackcomb and other local businesses.</p> <p>The RMOW helped arranged cold storage to store a significant donations from restaurants that had closed and secured space at the Whistler Conference Centre for food storage and as a temporary location to serve the large number of individuals and families requiring support. Additionally, the RMOW re-deployed staff from closed facilities (such as Meadow Park Sports Centre) to work temporarily at the Food Bank.</p> <p>The RMOW continues to work with WCSS on identifying operational needs for the Food Bank.</p>	<b>March 2020 and ongoing</b>
<b>Services for vulnerable community members</b>	<b>Whistler Community Services Society/ RMOW</b>	<p>Whistler Community Services Society and the RMOW worked collaboratively to secure BC Housing funding for self-isolation units for individuals who live in high density housing and are required to self-isolate or quarantine. Referrals are managed by the local family and ER doctors.</p> <p>The RMOW has been sharing the availability of these resources in its weekly COVID-19 newsletter as well as through resources developed for local businesses and PSA and newspaper ads.</p>	<b>January 2021 and ongoing</b>

COVID-19 testing and health authority communications	Sea to Sky Divisions of Family Practice/ VCH/ RMOW	The RMOW has been hosting weekly meetings with local family doctors who conduct COVID-19 testing in Whistler, local ER doctors and Vancouver Coastal Health to understand trends in local COVID-19 testing.	Ongoing
Community Well-being events	RMOW/ Arts Whistler/ Recovery Working Group	The “Tour de Pumpkins”, “12 Days of Joy” and “Whistler has Heart” events have provided the community with much-needed events to look forward to as well as connections to local mental health and well-being resources.	Ongoing

## Enforcement

RCMP enforcement	RMOW	Whistler RCMP continues proactively and reactively responding to COVID-19 related calls for service alongside maintaining Frontline policing duties. These reactive calls include: Quarantine Act, Emergency Measures Act, Public Health Order, and check well-being. The proactive operations utilized designated budgets for COVID focused enforcement including: patrols of high trafficked areas, check-ins with accommodation/restaurant providers for compliance or assistance, liaising with local health care providers, supported bylaw-driven service requests, and supporting other agencies in COVID checks such as WorkSafe BC, PHO's, and LCRB inspectors	Ongoing
Bylaw enforcement	RMOW	<p>Bylaw officers engage and educate the public on the risk of transmission of COVID-19, and provide information and guidance on the relevant public health orders with the aim of achieving voluntary compliance with the Orders. If necessary, individuals failing to comply can be warned, verbally or in writing, that failure to comply with the orders can result in fines and/or jail time. Escalation to RCMP as required.</p> <p>Bylaw officers also investigate complaints that are referred through the Provincial Orders Support Team and notify the RCMP if required.</p>	Ongoing

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## **SPRING/SUMMER COVID-19 PLANNING AND COMMUNICATIONS**

As spring and summer approach, planning is underway to determine appropriate communications and action items to continue to ensure a safe experience for visitors and safety of residents. These plans will be informed by lessons learned during last spring and summer as well as best practices observed in other communities and jurisdictions.

The COVID-19 vaccine rollout schedule means that while most seniors may be fully vaccinated by the end of spring/start of summer, a considerable portion of the population visiting Whistler will likely not be fully vaccinated as summer gets underway.

The community of Whistler has shown its incredible ability to pivot during the COVID-19 pandemic and quickly respond to changing regulations and realities. One of the community's greatest strengths moving forward is the open lines of communication between organizations and spirit of cooperation and togetherness that have been built and forged through Whistler's shared COVID-19 response. As we look towards our shared recovery, Whistler will be ready to welcome back the world when the time comes.

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## RESOURCES

[www.whistler.ca/COVID19](http://www.whistler.ca/COVID19)

[www.whistler.ca/SafeRestart](http://www.whistler.ca/SafeRestart)

[www.whistler.ca/business/covid-19-business-best-practices](http://www.whistler.ca/business/covid-19-business-best-practices)

[www.whistler.com/covid](http://www.whistler.com/covid)

[www.whistler.com/doors-open](http://www.whistler.com/doors-open)

[www.whistler.com/blog/post/2020/11/20/whistlerblackcomb/](http://www.whistler.com/blog/post/2020/11/20/whistlerblackcomb/)

<https://www.whistlerchamber.com/covid-19-guidance-and-resources-for-whistler-businesses/>

<https://www.whistlerchamber.com/teamwhistler/>

[www.skiwellbewell.ca](http://www.skiwellbewell.ca)

[www.skibcstrong.ca](http://www.skibcstrong.ca)



