

Proponents ID site for Aspen senior facility Land near Moore Open Space 'so important to us,' medical foundation official says

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ASPEN — Advocates of a continuing-care retirement center in Aspen have identified what they believe is the perfect site for the facility, off Maroon Creek Road, but it may face competing interest for its open space attributes.

Before a roomful of retirees in the meeting room at the Aspen fire station, Pitkin County commissioners listened to a pitch for the project, and the locale, during a work session Tuesday. The four commissioners present agreed there is a need for such a facility to serve the aging populace but, at first blush, couldn't commit to either support for the chosen site or offer any assurance that the county could help with the land purchase.

The group hoping to build a continuing-care retirement community, which would operate as a nonprofit, is looking for 15 to 20 acres that could accommodate 120 units. That sum includes 60 units where seniors could live independently, including 20 that would potentially be deed-restricted and subsidized much like local worker housing; 40 assisted-living units; and 20 units for residents who need nursing care, similar to what a nursing home provides.

After exploring various sites, advocates settled on a piece of the 45-acre property owned by the Moore family, north of the Aspen Recreation Center and west of the existing Moore Open Space, acquired by Pitkin County Open Space and Trails. It is on a bus line, near the ARC and close enough to town to keep seniors connected to the community.

"We feel it's so important to us. We really have reached the conclusion that no other property meets this criteria," said Kris Marsh, executive director of the Aspen Valley Medical Foundation. The foundation is working with a local task force and the Pitkin County Senior Council on the project.

A development company that was hired to assess local need for such a facility has concluded the demand exists, commissioners were told. The goal is to allow seniors to remain in the community; some can't because there is no nursing home in Pitkin County (there is one in Carbondale) and the hospital's assisted living facility, Whitcomb Terrace, offers just 15 units and has a waiting list.

Marsh said she was unable to discuss specifics about the property purchase, but said the hospital could be a player, as the new facility would replace Whitcomb Terrace, which could then be used as hospital housing, alleviating some of the need to build more housing at the hospital campus in conjunction with its planned expansion. Hospital CEO David Ressler confirmed her assertion.

Marsh also alluded to potential county involvement. The county has just begun trying to determine if it has any funds that could be allocated to assist with the land purchase, County Manager Hilary Fletcher confirmed. The city is also involved, Marsh said.

Commissioners posed various questions they'd like answered as the proposed project moves forward: How much entry to the facility would cost and whether locals could afford it, how local residents would receive priority for units at the complex, whether the tax-exempt bonds proponents intend to use to build the facility would require a ballot measure, and whether the facility could make do with fewer acres than what they've proposed.

Commissioner Jack Hatfield acknowledged the competing interests of the continued-care facility versus open space, and Commissioner Rachel Richards predicted a land-use battle.

"We want to hear that there are just no other possibilities," Hatfield said. "We need to hear that."

"This is a large facility in an area people are used to seeing as open, sagebrush meadows," Richards said, predicting opposition. "That's not to say it's not a fight that should be had, but it won't be easy."

Dale Will, director of Open Space and Trails, sat in on the discussion, but said afterward that he couldn't comment on the county's interest in the parcel as open space.

Further planning for the facility will be stymied until the site is nailed down, according to Marsh. Money can't be spent on formal site planning until the locale is a sure thing.

"We've just been paralyzed," she said.

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