

Wexner, Pitkin County to discuss land swap

Janet Urquhart
The Aspen Times

Pitkin County has yet to modify its latest proposal for the Wexner-Sutey Ranch land swap, but expects to do so before county commissioners have their first face-to-face meeting with Abigail Wexner.

Leslie and Abigail Wexner have proposed the controversial land swap; Abigail intends to meet with commissioners on April 20, according to the couple's representatives. She also attended a March discussion of the land trade hosted by Carbondale town trustees, but the Wexners have not taken part personally in the county's deliberations.

Commissioners will discuss how the county might modify its proposal when they meet behind closed doors on Tuesday, according to Commissioner George Newman, chairman of the board.

"I'm anticipating we'll see a revised compromise proposal ... at Tuesday's meeting," he said.

The Wexners, meanwhile, have said they'll withdraw their request for county support of the land trade if the two sides can't agree. The swap has been under discussion for more than a year.

Commissioners have scheduled a special meeting on April 20, allowing them to convene formally and take action, but Newman said he doesn't anticipate a decision. The special meeting allows the board to convene an executive session to discuss the swap out of the public eye if it so chooses.

"That's really the purpose for that special meeting," Newman said. "I would be surprised if there was a definite yes or no at that next meeting, but you never know."

The Wexners have proposed exchanging 1,268 acres of Bureau of Land Management property on the north flank of Mount Sopris, south of Carbondale, for the 520-acre Sutey Ranch to the north of the town. The BLM property would be folded into the Wexners' Two Shoes Ranch; the Sutey Ranch, valued for wildlife and recreational attributes, would become BLM land. All of the acreage at both sites would be protected from development.



Old ranch buildings, pasture lands and treed areas make up the 513-acre Sutey Ranch in Garfield County. The ranch has been offered in exchange for BLM land at the base of Mount Sopris, outside of Carbondale.

In the past year, the Wexners have sweetened the deal twice in an effort to win Pitkin County support. The county, meanwhile, unveiled its own proposal (which the Wexners rejected) and then modified it. Further modification is now contemplated.

The Wexners' representatives have said they intend to seek congressional approval of the land exchange. Though Pitkin County has no decision-making power in the matter, its support was thought to be important to securing approval at the federal level.

In a separate discussion on April 20, commissioners will meet with BLM repre-

sentatives. Land exchanges in general will be on the table — commissioners want to know how the agency identifies lands for disposal. The land the Wexners want to acquire was not on the BLM disposal list, but that doesn't preclude its consideration in a land trade.

Dale Will, director of the county's Open Space and Trails program, suggested commissioners also ask BLM representatives how they would administer a \$1 million endowment offered by the Wexners to handle wildlife enforcement and management of the Sutey Ranch if the property comes into the BLM's hands.

"It seems to me, that's a big question that

nobody has answered," Will said.

The DOW has said it wants Sutey Ranch closed to recreation in the wintertime, if it becomes public land, to protect wintering big game.

Commissioners also want to talk about the potential for recreational closures on other lands the DOW has identified as important winter range, particularly for elk.

In a recent meeting with commissioners, DOW District Wildlife Manager Kevin Wright suggested Light Hill and the Crown, both located in the midvalley, should both be closed to winter recreation. Both areas are managed by the BLM.

NEWS IN BRIEF

ASPEN

Innsbruck Aspen Residences join exchange program

The Innsbruck Aspen Residences have signed a long-term agreement to join the Registry Collection luxury exchange program, the companies recently announced.

Innsbruck Aspen has 17 luxury units in Aspen, which are sold in 1/12 interests. Affiliation with the Registry Collection at the Innsbruck allows owners there to "exchange into a quality selection of luxury destinations around the world," said R.J. Gallagher, a partner in Forte International, manager of marketing and sales for Innsbruck Aspen.

The Registry Collection program has 30,000 members and more than 130 affiliates on five continents. More than 175 properties are available for exchange or will be once they are developed. It claims to be the world's largest luxury residence exchange program.

ONLINE POLL

West End drive

This week's Aspen Times online poll focuses on the city's intentions for streets in the West End. The question: Should Aspen take steps to prevent motorists from using West End streets to bypass Main Street and the S-curves?

To find the poll, go to aspen-times.com and scroll down.

In response to last week's question — Are you ready for spring yet? — readers said they're ready for winter to end. With 292 votes cast, 76 percent said, Yes, I am so ready for sunshine and shorts weather, while 24 percent said, Heck no, I hope it snows until the lifts close.

Aspen Valley Hospital ballot seeking property tax renewal

Ballots going out in the mail

Janet Urquhart
The Aspen Times

Mail-in ballots will go out this week to voters in the Aspen Valley Hospital District, which is seeking renewal of an existing property tax that helps fund hospital operations.

The ballots are due back at AVH on Election Day — May 4 — by 7 p.m. Voters may mail back the ballots or drop them off at the hospital, but any ballot received after the cutoff won't be counted.

The mill levy, first approved in 1995, is up for its fourth reauthorization. Though the hospital is on sound financial footing, the tax remains a key piece of the facility's income stream and helps it hold down annual rate increases, according to Terry Collins, chief financial officer at AVH.

Voters are being asked to approve a levy of up to 1.5 mills for five more years.

The question, ballot issue A, actually asks for a tax increase. The verbiage is required by state law, as the existing tax will expire at the end of 2010 and a new, identical tax is proposed in its place, starting in 2011.

The ballot also asks voters to choose candidates for the hospital's board of directors. Initially, AVH administrators said there would be no board election, because there are three incumbents running for three seats. However, because the district is holding an election on the tax question, it is required to hold the scheduled board election, as well.

The candidates are John Sarpa, Lee Schumacher and Chuck Frias.

The AVH mill levy generates \$3.5 million annually and accounts for three-quarters of the hospital's annual net income, according to Collins.

"If the mill levy went away, we'd have to make that up by increasing our prices," he said.

AVH rate increases over the past five years have averaged 5 percent — half of what's typical in the industry, Collins said.

Six years ago, the hospital's finances were in disarray. The hospital had lost millions as a result of mismanagement and unbilled services, leading to an overhaul that included dismissing the former hospital CEO and chief financial officer. With new management and outsourced billing, AVH has pulled itself out of arrears.

The hospital has built up about \$43 million in cash reserves, which includes \$15 million pegged to help fund a planned expansion of the facility and about \$28 million that must be kept on hand in order to maintain the hospital's investment-grade bond rating. The rating allows it to save millions of dollars in interest on its debt, according to Collins.

Interest payments last year on \$21 million in outstanding bonds averaged just 0.22 percent as a result of the healthy bond rating, he said.

The hospital's 2010 operating budget, excluding about \$2 million annually that goes to paying principle and interest on debt, is about \$50 million, Collins said.