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County \$1.1 million shy of fundraising goal for the Droste property purchase

Writer:

Andrew Travers

Byline:

Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

Pitkin County has raised about \$200,000 from private donors to fill the \$1.5 million gap in funding for the already-completed purchase of the 841-acre Droste “mountain park” open space parcel between Aspen and Snowmass Village.

The Aspen Valley Land Trust also last month announced a “challenge grant” to match up to \$250,000 of donations. So, effectively, the county has \$400,000 in paid or promised cash toward its fundraising goal.

The amount of funds the county reports raising hasn't gone up since before Christmas and the closing of the \$17 million Droste deal on Dec. 29. Dale Will, director of the county's open space program, said that's because some early pledges have fallen off as new pledges and checks have continued to come in.

The county promised \$10 million for the buy, including the entire \$6 million available balance in its open space fund. A state conservation grant kicked in \$2.5 million, Snowmass Village voters approved a \$2 million contribution, and the City of Aspen pledged \$1 million.

The \$1.5 million remaining is to be made up with private donations, but was borrowed from the county's general fund. Thus far, Will estimated, the county has received 20 to 25 donations for the property, in amounts ranging from \$50 to \$100,000.

“I am pleased that people are appreciative that we borrowed money to get this thing closed and not let this contract go,” he said.

The land trust has made an online pitch for donations, and some private citizens have knocked on doors in the Snowmass Village area looking for support. But county officials and their elected commissioners have not yet made a visible public pitch for cash from their constituents.

County officials haven't set a deadline for when they want to raise the full amount. For now, the open space program is paying 1 percent interest on the outstanding loan from the county's general fund.

The Droste purchase was the capstone to a busy year of acquisitions for the county's open space program, which is funded through property taxes. Though their funds are tapped out, Will said he is still working on future deals to expand the county's public land holdings.

“I'm continuing to have conversations with land owners,” he said. “I'll meet with any interested land owner. Right now we don't have any funds sitting in the bank ready to go, but we can certainly entertain conservation contracts.”

Meanwhile, the county has closed the Droste property from all public access, pending the formation of a management plan for the parcel. The area includes critical winter range for local elk herds, but the county may develop hiking, biking and horse-riding trails in the future. That planning process is likely to begin this spring with an assessment of the area's wildlife habitat needs.

[andrew@aspdailynews.com](mailto:andrew@aspdailynews.com) [1]

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