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What's in a name? Public to rename Droste

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A committee tasked with choosing a name for Pitkin County's prized new 850-acre open space area decided Wednesday that the public and local kids should do the job.

"I think we should do a public contest," Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland said. "Who knows what ideas might be out there that may be really cool."

Ireland was joined on the naming committee by Pitkin County Commissioner Jack Hatfield; county open space trustee Hawk Greenway; Snowmass Village councilman John Wilkinson and Aspen Valley Land Trust director Martha Cochran.

The group decided it would begin taking public suggestions for names for the park today, through the city and county's website.

They will accept ideas through September. From the names submitted, the committee will choose a short list of finalists sometime in October.

They hope to take informal votes in local school assemblies and from the public at large, through an online poll and ballots in local papers.

They are aiming to use the public votes to choose a name in early November.

The committee is actually seeking two names. One is for the whole 850-acre parcel that open space officials have informally referred to as a "mountain park," and a separate name for the prominent ridge at the height of the property, along which the area's only trail currently runs.

A management plan is in the works, which likely will call for developing more trails on the property.

The parcel completes a 2,500-plus-acre corridor of public land between Aspen and Snowmass Village. It was purchased from the Droste family in December for \$17 million. The family and Pitkin County battled for more than a decade, as the Drostes sought to build a luxury subdivision on their land and the county attempted to block them.

The county partnered with the city of Aspen, Snowmass Village, the state, private donors and Aspen Valley land Trust to make the massive purchase from the family last year.

Since the December purchase, it has largely been referred to as the "Droste Open Space." Local officials want that name gone, both because of the family's adversarial positioning against the county and because people don't know how to pronounce it (the proper pronunciation is Drōstē).

County open space director Dale Will had previously used the name “Wapiti Ridge” for the property, included in the county’s successful application for a state grant to help fund the purchase. “Wapiti” is the Native American name for elk.

“That didn’t seem to catch on in the common parlance,” Will said Wednesday.

He and the rest of the naming committee are hoping to find a name that will stick and quickly supplant “Droste” in common usage.

“If it’s possible to brand the whole thing in a way that will stick, that’d be great,” Will said.

No clear front-runner names have arisen yet. Ones that the committee discussed included “Elk Park,” “Whiskey Ridge” and “Cozy Point Ridge.”

They had far more joke suggestions than serious ones.

Wilkinson jested that they should consider naming it after John Denver, which prompted Hatfield to feign vomiting.

The committee opted to maintain some control over the ideas for naming the park, fearing that something inappropriate or too goofy might win out. Ireland cited the example of the James Brown Soul Center of the Universe Bridge in Steamboat Springs as an example of the funky conclusions a public naming process might lead to, for better or worse. In 1993, Steamboat residents were asked to name a new bridge over the Yampa River, and, apropos of nothing, decided to honor soul singer James Brown.

Committee members voiced half-joking concern that Aspenites might rally around drug-friendly names like “4:20 Point” or “Bob Marley Ridge.” And Hatfield jested that some might opt to call it the “17 Mill,” referring to the price tag for the open space property. Poking fun at the stalled base village project in Snowmass Village, where about a quarter of the Droste property is located, Ireland suggested they ought to call it the “Base Village Chapter 7 Trail” or “Pat Smith Memorial,” after the project’s former developer.

He also suggested that they name it after Wilkinson, who said he’d been up on the ridge 25 times this summer.

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