

THE ASPEN TIMES

Land trust is on a roll as it reaches middle age

Nonprofit profile

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Aspen, CO Colorado
September 2, 2007

ASPEN - When the Aspen Valley Land Trust holds its annual Save the Land Dance on Sept. 15 it will be doing a lot more than trying to raise funds for its conservation efforts.

Colorado's oldest land trust will celebrate its 40th anniversary. It's got a lot to celebrate. The organization holds conservation easements, which prohibit development, on more than 20,000 acres in Pitkin and Garfield counties, with a bit in Eagle County.

In 2006 alone, the organization had 30 conservation projects that kept 5,200 acres out of developers' hands.

The organization receives conservation easements from landowners who want to preserve their land. In return, the state government provides tax credits, which landowners can either use or sell. AVLT's role is to hold the conservation easement and make sure the land doesn't get developed.

In addition to accumulating a sizable collection of easements, AVLT has secured solid financial standing. Executive Director Martha Cochran and her staff have built off their predecessors' efforts.

In the last form 990 filed with the Internal Revenue Service, AVLT showed net assets of almost \$5.3 million at the end of 2005.

In addition, 2005 was one of its most successful years financially. The organization collected \$328,190 in contributions. That comes from people who support AVLT's mission and also from a special program that taps into guests at the high-end Little Nell Hotel in Aspen. People who stay there are given the option of adding \$2 to their room charge and donating its to AVLT's conservation efforts.

The nonprofit also netted \$76,437 in dividends and interest from its investments in stocks and bonds. Special events, most notably the Save the Land Dance at Strang Ranch, pulled in \$55,742.

Total revenues for 2005 were \$604,679. Total expenses were \$483,082, leaving AVLT \$121,597 in the black for the year.

The bulk of expenses are for salaries and consultants' fees. AVLT requires substantial financial and legal advice on the easement deals it coordinates. It spent \$71,277 on fund-raising in 2005, mostly to put on the Land Dance, Cochran said. About \$143,000 was spent on compensation for the staff.

Cochran said AVLT's financial picture is so strong, in large part, because of an anonymous donation of \$1 million that it received six years ago. In addition, it built its assets by selling transferable developments rights on patented mining claims in the Hunter Creek Valley outside Aspen that it received from the estate of Fritz and Fabi Benedict.

Property owners who wish to increase the size of homes they can build or increase density can buy TDRs in Pitkin County. They sterilize the land that the TDRs are transferred from and increase development potential on the receiving property.

AVLT also listed one of the more unusual sources of income that will be seen on a form 990. The organization claimed \$71,734 in "employee theft recovery." A former bookkeeper for the organization, Carmen Andrews, was convicted of theft in Garfield County Court for taking funds from AVLT and placing them into her personal account.

Cochran said that AVLT received a settlement from its insurance company for the theft and also received a settlement from its bank in 2005. In addition, Andrews is paying back the funds she stole, Cochran said. Andrews is also paying back funds in a complicated restitution agreement in which AVLT will receive more money than it actually lost, then share proceeds with other parties affected by the theft, according to Cochran.

Another oddity of AVLT's finances is the way easements are treated on the books. When a landowner gives the organization a conservation easement worth \$5 million, AVLT doesn't consider that an asset. It's actually a liability because AVLT must spend money protecting that easement, Cochran noted. The IRS allows the organization to record its individual easements as \$1 assets, she said.

AVLT's finances go through an independent audit each year, which provides another layer of comfort to supporters that its finances "are in order," Cochran said.

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