



Pitkin County and AVLTT formalize partnership

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ASPEN – After two decades of jointly preserving property through conservation easements – more than 6,000 acres to date – Pitkin County Open Space and Trails and the Aspen Valley Land Trust have formalized their relationship on paper.

Though the organizations have forged a cooperative relationship – one that is rare in the world of competing land-conservation entities, according to Open Space Director Dale Will – it was time to formalize the oversight of lands in which they have shared interests.

An agreement regarding the administration of jointly held conservation easements won approval from Pitkin County commissioners on Wednesday. It spells out which organization is responsible for monitoring which easements and clarifies the lead agency when it comes to ongoing administration and enforcement of land deals that are intended to last forever.

“The perpetual nature of the easements is difficult to comprehend,” said Martha Cochran, executive director of the AVLTT.

Conservation easements allow landowners to retain ownership of their property, but conserve what are typically large portions of it from future development through the sale of a conservation easement to entities like the AVLTT or Open Space and Trails. Often, the landowner realizes tax benefits from the transaction, as well.

Pitkin County and the AVLTT have jointly acquired 13 conservation easements involving 6,245 acres since the county's program was authorized by voters in 1990. The AVLTT dates back further – it was initially established as the Parks Trust in 1966 and renamed AVLTT in 1992.

Holding the easements jointly offers a double layer of protection to make sure conserved lands remained conserved, Cochran said.

“It really means that we have each other's back,” she said.

“We've jointly made commitments to be stewards of the land forever,” Will told the commissioners. “It's a tribute to both organizations that we've come as far as we have without needing this agreement.”

“Which doesn't mean we don't have disagreements,” Cochran added.

The agreement designates the county Open Space and Trails Program as the lead agency for easements on eight properties – Windstar Preserve, Capitol Creek Ranch, Dart Family, Crystal Island Ranch, Harvey Ranch, Crown Mountain Ranch, W/J Ranch and Grange Ranch.

The AVLТ is the lead agency for the easements on Happy Day Ranch, John Nieslanik Ranch, Clark Ranch, Darien Ranch and Flying Dog Ranch parcel 4 in Woody Creek.

The lead agency is responsible for visiting each property annually to document its condition and make sure the landowner continues to comply with the provisions of the conservation easement.

“It requires us to maintain a relationship with each new owner of that land,” Will said.

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