



Search this site

[Home](#) > [April 8, 2010](#) >

Citizen group taking steps toward open space program

By Trina Ortega
The Sopris Sun

A citizen-led group pushing for a countywide open space program gained approval from Garfield County Commissioners Trési Houpt and Mike Samson on Tuesday to keep researching whether such a program is right for Garfield County. The group will be working with a county staffer to do so. John Martin was absent from a special work session where the group presented its work to date and unveiled its name, the Garfield Trails and Land Conservation Initiative, or TLC. Both Houpt and Samson expressed support for the group to look into conducting a public opinion survey. Samson and Houpt will also continue to allow the county's long-range planner, Tamra Allen, to serve as a liaison between the citizen group and the board of county commissioners (BOCC). Referencing a 2008 community survey and some preliminary citizen feedback on the county's current comprehensive plan revision, Houpt said the open space work has merit. "Everything we've done recently has come back with positive support for open space. With that in mind, I think it's really important that we continue with this process," Houpt said. The TLC group is made up of a handful of citizens and organizations, which have been meeting regularly since summer 2009 to discuss whether a countywide open space program would be viable. The group's work was prompted in part by the dialogue that has surrounded the Sutey/Two Shoes land swap proposal, according to Jock Jacober, a member of the initiative.

That land exchange was a "coalescing idea" and an eye-opener for many, Jacober told the commissioners. TLC members say it has helped bring residents together to consider whether the time is right for a county-level open space/land conservation program.

"The idea is that there are a lot more Sutey Ranches that are out there, and they all need some conservation work," said TLC member Dale Will, who is the director of the Pitkin County Open Space and Trails Program.

In the fall, the group met with the county commissioners and the commissioners requested that a feasibility study be conducted with assistance from the Trust for Public Land. The BOCC also appointed Allen to work with the group at that time. Allen has been one of the key staffers working to craft the current comprehensive plan.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) helped gather input on open space and conservation programs in other Colorado counties and laid out different funding opportunities among other research.

TPL is a national non-profit land conservation organization that conserves land as parks, community gardens, historic sites, rural lands, and other natural places. Since 1994, TPL has helped states and communities pass more than 380 ballot measures. Since the mid-1990s, the trust has had an 82 percent rate of success in getting ballot measures passed, said Dee Frankfourth, TPL's associate director of conservation strategies.

Based on TPL's study, Frankfourth said the best possible funding sources in Garfield County could be one or more of the following: sales and use tax; property tax; revenue bonds; and/or oil and gas impact fees.

For the feasibility study, TPL looked at how much an open space program would cost individual taxpayers and how much money might be raised through the different scenarios.

Based on 2007 data, for example, a 0.125 percent sales tax increase could generate \$1.26 million annually for a dedicated program and would amount to \$20 a year for the taxpayer. A 1-mill property tax would cost a typical homeowner \$25.34 per year, and could generate an estimated \$3.25 million annually. Those are some of the less expensive funding scenarios TPL has drawn up.

Houpt questioned whether the economic climate has had a negative affect on citizens' willingness to fund such programs. But TPL staff said the group's success rate has not declined as a result of the recession.

However, for the first time ever, Boulder County residents voted down a sales tax increase to fund their open space program during the recession, according to TPL attorney Peggy Chiu. She added that TPL did not work with Boulder County on its initiative.

Commissioner Mike Samson said he is concerned that even if residents support an increase in taxes, there are other issues of equal importance — such as transportation — that require new funding.

The commissioners discussed with TPL the idea of splitting a tax increase between two programs. Frankfourth said such funding "usually does not work very well."

"We like to encourage counties to come up with dedicated funds for conservation," Frankfourth said.

Houpt noted that some county programs are currently funded through such a split tax increase. "You sometimes have to fight to keep that [the allocations] in place, but we've been pretty successful."

As part of its directive, TPL and the new open space group will consider crafting a public opinion poll that gauges taxpayers' interest in both land conservation and transportation. Commissioners have not yet agreed to fund a survey, which is estimated to cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000, according to Frankfourth.

Beyond that, if the survey shows support, the next logical move is to craft language for a ballot initiative, Frankfourth said.

"We're in a position now to make something special happen in Garfield County," said TLC member Clark Anderson, director of the Western Colorado Legacy Program.

TLC has broad-based public representation, is launching a Web site, and aims to hold public presentations and workshops to spread the word and gather feedback. And the group wants to work in "lock step" with the BOCC, Anderson said.

TLC has determined at least two key goals for the program: that it will be countywide and that it will support trails as well as focus on land conservation. But the group is still seeking support from the BOCC.

"This is going to take some sort of administration of program funds," Anderson said.

The concept of an open space program in Garfield County is not new. Several groups have come forward at different times to try to launch programs in the economically and socially diverse county. One of the more notable initiatives was in 2001 when voters supported a special district but did not approve the 2.5-mill property tax to fund the program.

TLC members agree that the funding source is the key, but they also say attitudes are shifting in favor of land conservation programs.

Chris Harrison, chair of the Carbondale Parks & Recreation Commission, said he believes landowners across the county are beginning to see the effects of the powerful oil and gas industry and are, therefore, more interested in land conservation.

"We've had 10 years of oil and gas going crazy in the western part of the county. I think there are a lot of ranchers and farmers who are starting to see that it would be good to have the county on their side to protect their land," Harrison said.

Next Steps:

The Garfield Trails and Land Conservation Initiative is expected to meet with the commissioners again in a few months. The group is seeking additional members. To get involved, visit the Web site garfieldtlic.org (expected to go live soon) or call Martha Cochran at 963-8440.