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Upscale homes proposed near Alta's Albion Basin
Development » But there is local opposition; water rights a factor.

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Alta » A new sight could greet the thousands of people who visit Albion Basin each summer for its brilliant wildflowers -- 10 high-end homes lining the S-curve on the unpaved road.

The estate of JoAnne Shrontz, a former Alta Town Council member and a granddaughter of Alta Ski Area co-founder Joe Quinney, has applied to subdivide 26 acres on Patsey Marley Hill -- what Friends of Alta director Jennifer Clancy calls the "gateway" to Albion Basin. The houses could be as large as 8,000 square feet.

But the Alta Planning Commission has recommended the Town Council deny the application, citing access to water, impacts on natural waterways and other concerns. The council could make a final decision this fall.

"This is an important issue," Alta Mayor Tom Pollard said at a council meeting this week. "We [should] do whatever we need to do to look at it in a complete manner."

Clancy said her group, which supports conservation efforts around Alta, is "not in favor of the subdivision" unless the estate can meet "all of the ordinance requirements."

The proposed subdivision opens old sores about development at the top of scenic Little Cottonwood Canyon, an area that Salt Lake City, Alta and the U.S. Forest Service manage as watershed.

In 1991, Salt Lake City passed an ordinance that prohibits the use of capital water rights in expanding existing contracts in watershed areas -- such as Alta -- outside of the contracts' original boundaries. This stopped the town from adding new connections to its water system beyond its 1976 limits.

The law was challenged by property owners in Albion Basin -- who were prevented from hooking up new homes -- but it prevailed in federal court.

The Patsey Marley property, annexed into Alta in 1980, is now a "precedential issue," said Jeff Niermeyer, Salt Lake City Public Utilities director.

Alan Sullivan, an attorney for the Shrontz estate said Salt Lake City has an "obligation to connect us by virtue of agreements that go back to the 1970s."

Niermeyer disagrees, citing a 2002 agreement that Shrontz signed, acknowledging her property could not be served by Alta's system.

Both parties agree, however, that the estate does have the right to build its own infrastructure to tap water from a nearby mine.

"Regardless," of whether the subdivision can tie into the town water system, which traverses the property and would be the "least intrusive" option, Sullivan told the Town Council, "water will be delivered."

Shrontz, who died in a plane crash in 2003, originally planned to build a hotel that would serve Alta Ski Area. But the town refused to change the land's zoning from single-family homes, Sullivan said in an interview.

Alta resident Roger Bourke, who can see the property from his window, said he would have preferred the lodge because it would have concentrated development on the bottom of the hill and boosted tourism.

"There are not very many beautiful places left in this country, and we ought to look to hang onto the ones we have," said Bourke, a Town Council candidate. "The population is going up. The number of beautiful places is not."

The planned subdivision has shrunk from 16 to 10 homes, features "unobtrusive" design and preserves 23 of the 26 acres "untouched," Sullivan noted.

Erik Erlingsson, Shrontz's son and a Salt Lake City physician, said his family has considered Alta its home for four generations.

"I love the community," he said. "We believe that this is a very environmentally-sound, beneficial development for the town."

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with abusing a corpse What's next

» The Alta Town Council will discuss the Patsey Marley subdivision Sept. 3, 3:30 p.m., at the Alta Community Center.

» Before making a final decision, the council will schedule a public hearing, which could happen as soon as October.

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