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Alta debates open space, houses
Environment » No date set for vote on new subdivision.

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Alta » A proposal to build a 10-lot subdivision at the gateway to Albion Basin sparked a debate Wednesday between open-space backers and private-property advocates.

The Alta Town Council held a public hearing on Patsey Marley Hill, a development proposed by the estate of JoAnne Shrontz, a former member of the council who died in a 2003 plane crash. The 26-acre property rings the S-curve on the summer road that each year carries thousands of hikers to picturesque Albion Basin.

"This ecosystem is irreplaceable habitat to some of the world's most renowned wildflowers, wildlife, wetlands and beautiful fields of snow," said Friends of Alta executive director Jen Clancy. "When landscapes change due to development they are lost forever."

Save Our Canyons, along with a handful of Alta residents and enthusiasts, joined Clancy in urging preservation of the slope.

But Frank Perkins praised the estate for a "well thought out" subdivision. He and a few others voiced concerns about the rights of Shrontz's heirs.

"One of my issues here is a property owner who I feel is having his rights taken away," Perkins said. "We'd all like to save the environment...but would you want your [land] all of a sudden taken arbitrarily away?"

For the Town Council, the decision comes down to whether the subdivision application complies with town and state statutes. If it does, the council must approve it.

In July, the Alta Planning Commission recommended the council deny the application, citing its failure to meet requirements for water and sewer service, emergency-vehicle access, winter parking and setbacks from natural waterways.

But attorneys for the estate say they are working on needed fixes, including a special-use permit from the U.S. Forest Service to build a private water line across federal land. The proposal could shrink from 10 lots to seven to avoid natural waterways identified by Alta's engineer.

"We have the right to proceed through the land-use review process," said estate attorney Alan Sullivan. "What we are dealing with here is a complicated situation with many moving parts. I can assure you we have been acting with reasonable diligence."

Another attorney for the estate, Charles Livsey, said it could be as long as two years before the development gets federal and state approvals needed for the water line.

Town Administrator John Guldner, in a letter read aloud at the hearing by another staffer, argued "nothing requires the town to hold the application open indefinitely."

Alta resident and council candidate Roger Bourke urged the council to ignore the "blizzard of words" the developer has "shoveled upon you."

"The developer has not complied with the requirements set forth by the town ordinances," Bourke said. "You are obligated to dismiss the application quickly and move on to other business."

After the meeting, Mayor Tom Pollard said he doesn't know when the council will put the issue to a vote. Written comments will be accepted until the end of the day Friday.

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