

County to buy Peru Creek Basin open space

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BRECKENRIDGE - The county commissioners are authorizing open space purchases and environmental work in the Peru Creek Basin that continue a strategy of preventing development in the basin and trying to keep heavy metals from flowing into the main stem of the Snake River.

The county's Open Space Program will work on executing a contract to buy about 115 acres that include the Shoe Basin and Peruvian mines, but not pieces of the mine where future environmental liability is a question.

Program director Todd Robertson said the target price is about \$1,000 an acre.

The land is owned by Transpacific Tourism LLC, which in turn is owned by Harvey Anderson of Littleton, who bought it in 1990. Anderson apparently thought he would resell it to a Japanese firm that would bottle Peru Creek water, according to Brian Lorch, the Open Space Program's resource specialist.

"The Japanese must have seen the downside and he ended up with the property," Lorch said.

The irony is that part of the Open Space initiative is to stop heavy-metals tainted water from seeping into Peru Creek, a tributary of the Snake.

The cleanup project would be the Shoe Basin Mine tailings pile, located where people park their cars to hike up to Argentine Pass.

Robertson said snowmelt leaches through the pile and runoff from the base of the pile carries tainted water into Peru Creek.

The remediation project envisions capping the pile and recontouring it. The work is estimated to cost between \$135,000 and \$150,000 and the county will seek grants to help fund it.

If it goes through, the Shoe Basin work will be a demonstration project to help clean up the Snake River, an idea that first came to light about three years ago when Arapahoe Basin was looking for a project to balance the advent of snowmaking and water diversions.

The county and A-Basin owner Dundee Realty signed an agreement to do a project. The first

one, in Cinnamon Gulch in the Peru basin, was squelched because of environmental liability accruing to the county.

U.S. Rep. Mark Udall's "Good Samaritan" bill, if ever passed, would allow such work to occur without liability passing on to the do-gooders.

Mining activity in the Peru Creek Basin began more than 100 years ago and has long since ceased, but like in other parts of the county, modern-day citizens are still coping with environmental consequences.

The Snake River is hard-pressed to sustain a fishery because of heavy metals that continually flow into it.

Robertson said the Transpacific purchase is one more step in a plan to keep the Peru Creek Basin clean of development and backcountry in character.

The basin is zoned A-1, which allows one unit per 20 acres. Only the Upper Blue Basin is protected by special backcountry zoning that would prevent trophy homes from appearing in the backcountry.

Lorch said much of the basin above the Shoe Basin and Peruvian mines is protected by other open space purchases, the U.S. Forest Service and the city of Golden, which owns the Vidler Tunnel water project.

"Most development is potentially closed out," Lorch said.

That's not so below the Shoe Basin Mine and adjacent Transpacific property under contract.

Inholdings include the privately owned Decatur townsite, which Robertson said is not for sale, and the Chihuahua townsite.

Chihuahua is owned in part by Gary Miller of Keystone, who contends the town is still incorporated and holds 503 developable lots. Miller wants to trade Chihuahua to the Forest Service for a public parcel at Keystone Resort adjacent to already-developed lands. He wants the county to transfer part of Chihuahua's development potential to the Keystone parcel.

While the county commissioners are forging ahead on the Transpacific property, it is not without frustration.

Commissioner Bill Wallace blasted the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for holding to stringent environmental liability on land disturbed more than 100 years ago.

He said the EPA would better spend its time and money on current polluters.

"I am really pissed off at the EPA sometimes," Wallace said. "This (pollution) happened more

than 100 years ago. The big issue now is acquiring land for open space as opposed to having some trophy home built on it."

Wallace's tirade is directed at the EPA's string of liability on polluted lands. The county won a \$250,000 EPA grant to study the Peru Creek Basin and determine which lands are clean and acquirable, as opposed to those the county should keep at arm's length.

Commissioner Tom Long wondered if the county wasn't taking on the EPA liability, despite all of the study.

Commissioner Gary Lindstrom said the only choice was "to move forward."

"We have to do something on the ground in that area. I don't see, hopefully, unintended consequences of cleaning up the water," he said.

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