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Basalt council shares views on Pan and Fork site future



A crowd starts packing the Basalt Town Council chambers Tuesday night before a highly-charged meeting on downtown development plans.

Basalt Town Council members pledged in a highly charged meeting Tuesday night that they will be open-minded about development on the former Pan and Fork Mobile Home Park site.

However, four members of the board stressed it is important that any development plan for the half of the site closest to Two Rivers Road provides easy access to the parkland being developed on the half closest to the Roaring Fork River.

The six council members present at the meeting strongly denied that they have met secretly to determine the fate of the property or made any decisions. They urged a citizens' group that they formed one month ago, the Downtown Area Advisory Committee, to keep working on a recommendation for the Pan and Fork and two other major parcels.

More than 50 residents, including some members of the planning committee, attended the meeting, and roughly 16 of them vented frustrations over what they perceived to be a "hijacked" process. They pressed the council members to share their thoughts on the Pan and Fork's future.

Councilman Gary Tennenbaum wasted little time addressing audience charges that the council members' minds were made up.

“Don’t get mad at us yet. Wait until we make a decision then decide if you want to get up in arms.”

Councilman Rob Leavitt

“I didn’t have any secret meetings with anybody else to decide on anything,” he said.

Tennenbaum said the confrontation by the angry crowd surprised him because the board was waiting to see what recommendation is advanced by the Downtown Area Advisory Committee not only at the Pan and Fork but also at Lions Park and the former Clark’s Market building.

Whatever decisions are made, he said, must involve compromise and collaboration. The proposals must be representative of all Basalt residents, not just the crowd at the meeting, he said.

“How we do that is going to be critically important to my vote. In the end, it does come to council, but I don’t think that you’re being railroaded by any of us,” Tennenbaum said.

He said he loves communities that preserve big, open views. Tennenbaum lamented that the Gold Rivers condominium building in Basalt blocks both access to and the view of the Roaring Fork River. He wants to avoid that at the Pan and Fork site.

“How do we do something better than that?” Tennenbaum said. “I don’t have an agenda to make it all a park, and I don’t have an agenda to make it all development, either.”

Councilman Rob Leavitt said he already went on the record at a council meeting saying he wants to preserve an open corridor from Two Rivers Road to the Roaring Fork River.

The town of Basalt purchased the half of the Pan and Fork site closest to the river with open space funds. The intent was always to turn it into a riverfront park.

The nonprofit Roaring Fork Community Development Corp. purchased the half of the property closest to Two Rivers Road. It has worked with developers on plans but is waiting for Basalt’s planning process to play out.

“In my mind, it’s not going to be Town Park and it’s not going to be highly developed,” Leavitt said of the parcel closest to the road.

Leavitt said he wants the Downtown Area Advisory Committee to be creative when working on a recommendation. He said he also would weigh opinions of the community at large when making a decision.

“The process hasn’t been hijacked. No one has been railroaded. We haven’t made any decisions yet. We haven’t even discussed it yet, so I feel like people got carried away,” Leavitt told the crowd.

“Don’t get mad at us yet,” he added. “Wait until we make a decision; then decide if you want to get

up in arms.”

Councilman Rick Stevens said the audience was “spot on” by regarding the Pan and Fork site as a place where development can revitalize the downtown.

“I’m here to build a community,” he said.

Later in the meeting, Stevens said developers and business operators won’t invest in downtown if the community cannot come up with a shared vision.

“We’re not going to be able to get a developer in here to do anything unless we demonstrate that we’re going to set some expectations,” he said. “If we keep taking two steps forward and one step back, then they are not going to come in here and open their checkbook.”

He provided a glimpse of his vision by saying that in the past nobody wanted to see three- or four-story structures in downtown Basalt.

“I think we’ve gotten past that,” Stevens said. “Everybody appreciates the only way we can get anything downtown is to increase the density.”

Councilman Mark Kittle kept his comments concise. He said he supported removing the trailers from the Pan and Fork, raising half of the property out of the floodplain to prepare it for development and approving “something to get some beds in here.”

Like the other council members, he said the board hasn’t had discussions about the property.

“I can assure you my vote’s not going to be for a park,” Kittle said.

Councilman Bernie Grauer said Town Manager Mike Scanlon and the council picked a bottom-up process to determine downtown proper uses with the best of intentions.

“If we didn’t want the citizens to be involved, we wouldn’t have started this process,” he said.

The flaw was the council didn’t provide the Downtown Area Advisory Committee with any direction, he said. That contributed to the mistrust and suspicions that the council had made up its mind already, he suggested.

Grauer said he regretted that so many angry people turned out at the meeting.

“I don’t want our politics to be a blood sport like it is in Aspen. It never has been,” he said.

As for the Pan and Fork, Grauer said his position remains the same as when he campaigned for a council seat in the April election.

“What I said is I think there needs to be a significant amount of park,” he said, stressing that it must have active rather than passive uses. “Just having a bunch of housing is not going to make that active. It may privatize it and actually make it a duller, less interesting place.”

Adding some residences is important to the town, he said, and the Pan and Fork site is large enough to absorb some development and leave space for a first-rate town park.

Mayor Jacque Whitsitt said she wants to see “hundreds” of residential units added at the former Clark’s site. Downtown businesses are struggling, she said, because there aren’t enough people living there. She said she believes it is vital to keep a significant amount of the Pan and Fork open for park use.

“A little bit more development I can deal with. I do want to be able to see that river,” Whitsitt said.

She defended her vision by saying hundreds of people flood Denver’s Confluence Park every day when the weather is good, adding that it is a permanent attraction and a permanent provider of vitality. The Pan and Fork can provide that same boost for Basalt and make it unique in the Roaring Fork Valley, she said.

“No one else has that. Everybody else has buildings in their downtown. Nobody else has a river that you can see from a road, a river that you can see from town,” Whitsitt said.

Councilman Herschel Ross wasn’t able to attend the meeting.

The Downtown Area Advisory Committee will continue to meet on Thursdays and is expected to forward a recommendation at the end of the year. The council’s consideration of plans for downtown will start in 2015.

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