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Second-home documentary sparks debate

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An impromptu showing of a documentary on second homes triggered an hour-and-a-half long debate about sustainable communities among a mixed group of elected officials, former elected officials, civic employees and longtime locals on Thursday. [Send To Printer »](#)

Local nonprofit the Sopris Foundation showed its film, "Nobody's Home," to a small group of involved local residents in the Aspen Skiing Co.'s conference room at the Aspen Business Center yesterday. The 15-minute documentary on Aspen's change from ski-bum haven into second-home enclave was made for a conference in Missoula, Mont. this summer on living in the new West. It was meant to spark dialog on what people could learn from Aspen's successes and failures -- and that it did.

The dozen or so attendees of Thursday's screening covered affordable housing, how to reach constituents, zoning and other policy changes, public interest, political will and the role of newspapers. They also went back and forth on whether Aspen -- and to some extent Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood Springs -- could still be sustainable communities for local working people.

"Basalt, Carbondale, Glenwood Springs are salvageable," said Dwight Shellman, a former Pitkin County commissioner. "Aspen has kind of lost it and it's going to take a new kind of leadership to hold the line there."

The board of commissioners Shellman sat on in the early 1970s was credited with formulating the first strict growth control regulations in not only Pitkin County, but the United States. Shellman drew upon that experience, recommending today's leaders to hold their ground when it comes to taking bold measures to regulate growth, but not without first asking constituents what they want.

Shellman said there was a lot of work done with caucuses and politicians walking neighborhoods asking what people wanted in the '70s, and that meetings on important issues were always packed.

"The constituency Aspen addresses (now) is the developers and businesses, not the residents," he said, adding that the non-voting second-home owner is not part of that constituency. "You have to stop the discussion and ask, 'What do we want?' If we say what we want, the tools are infinite."

Sopris Foundation staff laid out some of those suggested tools, some more realistic than others: zoning areas for full-time residents, a massive buydown of homes on Cemetery Lane and in the West End, a tax policy discouraging the flipping of homes, using transferable development rights (TDRs) for community benefit, and an affordable housing land trust.

Some pointed out that things have changed since the '70s, and some of Shellman's methods may not be quite as feasible today. Aspen has gone from being a traditional tourist town to a bloated economy based on real estate sales and massive home construction that employs the majority of the population. Towns like Basalt, a bedroom community for upvalley workers with little real industry of its own, are far different from Aspen past and present, where most of the working class lives in employee housing and where most of

the jobs are.

Basalt Town Councilman Chris Seldin pointed out that most Basaltines own free-market housing -- although that's getting increasingly unattainable -- so a property tax, for example, would hit them hard. And something like a resident-occupied zone overlay with restrictions on their main investment could not be imposed.

Seldin, who was elected in the spring of 2006 as part of a slate of young, slow-growth candidates, said he doesn't see the political will in Basalt to make radical changes. He noted that during recent public hearings on Basalt's master plan, special interests packed the room while very few people from the community at large attended.

Shellman suggested that rather than developing nebulous-sounding policies with staff and consultants and trying to force the public to get interested, to go to local residents and ask them what they want their neighborhood to look like. That will spawn interest, he said.

But he also suggested some dramatic changes, like manipulating things that drive free-market pricing and makes Aspen desirable to second-home owners.

"The way to not have 10,000-square-foot homes is not to allow them," he said. "You have to encumber the market in a way that people will go somewhere else."

The difference in philosophy between Shellman and Seldin became clear during a discussion about downzoning -- or restricting an area for a narrower use than it would be without the regulation. Shellman, an attorney, suggested that local governments be prepared to pay in case downzoning actions are considered takings -- which is when regulation devalues property and the government fails to compensate the property owner. Seldin, who is also an attorney, said, "We can't pay."

To which Shellman promptly responded, "Don't say you can't. You can."

Someone pointed out that most of the local constituents are employed in real estate or building trades -- the very industries that some are suggesting should be harshly regulated -- and have their livelihoods bound up in that.

"We're farming real estate; that's our business," said Glenn Rappaport, a Basalt town councilman and architect. "You can't go to a farming community and tell them not to farm when there's plenty of good earth. It's disingenuous and hypocritical."

Rappaport also pointed out that while the wealthy used to stay in hotels in Aspen, they now can't afford not to buy second homes, because of the financial returns the raging real estate market is bringing them.

All of that does not bode well for trying to regulate energy use, which is much higher in Aspen than in other towns, and the subject of a recently released study by the Sopris Foundation looking at second-home energy consumption.

Attendees acknowledged Aspen and Pitkin County's foresight in creating an affordable housing program that now includes several thousand units, putting it far ahead of other Western communities. But as free-market housing becomes more and more unattainable to the working class, it was asked whether Aspen's rule of new development providing housing for 60 percent of the employees it generates is enough.

"Nobody's Home" will be shown to communities that are grappling with some of these issues, said Sopris Foundation founder John McBride. Its purpose is to generate conversations and, perhaps, a bit of nostalgia. Those interviewed in the movie -- a journalist, an architect and McBride -- reminisce about the way Aspen used to be, full of

people of all classes just happy to be there and mingling among themselves. But everybody, as Shellman points out in the film, likes Aspen the way it is when they get there, no matter whether its in the '60s or '90s.

McBride points out that Aspen should stop zoning for appearance -- "Aspen is more beautiful than it ever was" -- and define what residential means to its citizens.

Also in the film, Aspen Mayor Mick Ireland agrees with Crested Butte's mayor that in rapidly growing resort communities like theirs, the free market can't be allowed to go unfettered if they want to retain something for their full-time citizens.

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