

Aspen Daily News

Printed From: http://www.aspendailynews.com/article_22859

Housing fee could slam Aspen Country Day

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Wed 11/14/2007 11:00PM

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Aspen Country Day School might get slammed with \$618,000 in employee housing impact fees for the renovation and expansion of its Castle Creek campus, under an amended Pitkin County law.

Pitkin County commissioners on Wednesday passed on second reading a measure that would require commercial and luxury lodge properties to pay 100 percent of an employee housing impact fee. Previously, commercial and lodge properties were only required to pay 25 percent of that fee — determined by the number of employees a project would generate — but the county amended the ordinance in anticipation of the eventual redevelopment of the Buttermilk ski area. According to Pitkin County attorney John Ely, the school's expansion will also fall under the new version of the ordinance.

That will have "severe implications" for the private, nonprofit school, Aspen Country Day Business Manager Scott Hicks told commissioners. "We're not burying our heads in the sand and saying we don't have this (affordable housing) issue," Hicks said, "but we're not a developer. We don't have the opportunity to pass these costs through to a buyer." He added that the pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade school provides an essential service.

Although the impact fee would represent only about 1.5 percent of the total budget for the expansion project — which would more than double the square footage built on the campus shared by Country Day and the Aspen Music Festival and School, to 106,000 square feet — the school is just beginning a \$40 million fundraising project, and every dollar is already allocated, he said. The two institutions will split the cost of construction.

He added that Aspen Country Day generally raises about \$700,000 per year in addition to tuition fees, to break even and subsidize every student with approximately \$5,000. Under the old county ordinance, the school would have paid an approximately \$150,000 impact fee. The change represents an increase of approximately \$460,000 — a significant portion of the school's contingency funds.

The music school and Aspen Country Day masterplan application for the expansion will likely go before commissioners for a lengthy hearing process after the first of the year. If all goes well, the plan could be approved and construction begin as early as next fall, but Aspen Country Day would have to pay the entire employee housing impact fee on receipt of the first building permit — a major blow. Hicks said the school anticipates adding 18 employees as it grows.

Although they made it clear that real discussion will have to wait until they see a development application, commissioners weren't keen on the idea of exempting the school from having to pay the full impact fee.

"I think it's very important to get real about housing. There's never enough, and the future's only going to get bleaker," said Commissioner Jack Hatfield. "It would be a great benefit to both institutions to have those (housing) units in the future," added Commissioner Rachel Richards.

Hicks said both schools are fully cognizant of their affordable housing needs, but noted that building units on their campus would be nearly impossible because of various natural hazards and constraints. He pointed out that both schools have been in discussions with county staff about affordable housing since 2004.

The music school has some property it could conceivably build on in the future, and Aspen Country Day could potentially partner on that effort, he said, but no formal agreements have been made. The Aspen Music Festival and School does not anticipate any growth in student body or staff, and so is not responsible for a housing impact fee.

As for Aspen Country Day, Hicks said, the impact fee would have to come out of one of a handful of sources: \$600,000 in scholarships offered to maintain the diversity of the student body; faculty salaries and benefits; or an increase in the already-hefty tuition — which ranges from \$13,800 for pre-kindergartners to \$19,700 for middle school students.

Those options are not especially attractive, he added: "I don't know where that fee is going to come from (if we have to pay it)."

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