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CULTURAL PANEL

From Page 1

committee member and senior planner for the county. "It is the purpose of this project to develop a planning tool that will help the citizens of Clear Creek County to make an informed decision about their cultural resources."

At the conclusion of the nearly 2½-hour meeting, the commissioners said only that they had a lot of information to consider before making any decisions and would not comment further.

However, Commissioner Kevin O'Malley said he would keep in mind the county's mission statement: "Honoring our past, while designing our future."

A tense meeting

The tension in the room during the April 7 meeting was palpable. The audience, many of whom were dressed in Carhartt coveralls and work flannel, were clearly on their guard as members of the committee, dressed in business attire, presented their findings, most of which was informational rather than directed at taking any action.

The lack of specifics from the committee made residents uncomfortable.

"I definitely think there is a hidden agenda here," said Idaho Springs city council member Kate Collier. "I want to see (Clear Creek County) boom economically, not become a ghost town because we are historic."

"(The agenda) is not hidden," said Ed Rapp, president of the Clear Creek Watershed Foundation and former Clear Creek commissioner. "It has been out there for more than 20 years. This grouping wanted to make (Clear Creek County) a national park."

Clear Creek resident Abe Barnhard said he was concerned but acknowledged that the committee wasn't recommending any immediate action.

"This is more of a milestone than a hearing, so obviously there wasn't any legislation or decision-making, but it is an important step in finding out the optimum use for mining, transportation (and such) in this county," Barnhard said.

Speakers from the committee tried in vain to calm the fears of residents that they would lose control of their property. At one point, an audience member asked: "So, what you're telling us is that we can't do what we want with our land if this thing goes through?"

The committee wants the county to assess its cultural resources, which can include archaeological sites, architectural sites and places of traditional cultural value.

Ironically, within the context of culturally/ historically significant sites, piles of mine tailings — the processed remnants of mine excavation, which can cause environmental problems — can be considered a cultural resource or historically significant enough to warrant preservation.

Conversely, those same tailings can be reused, according to Barnhard, to make a composite material that would be very strong and ideal for use in

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—Idaho Springs city council member Kate Collier

construction.

Members of the audience were aghast at the thought that a tailings pile on their property could be considered, and thus protected, from removal or further use.

At one point, tempers flared when someone in the audience spoke out while the committee was making its presentation. O'Malley instructed the audience to let the committee finish and threatened to call the sheriff to restore order. The audience member later apologized to O'Malley for his outburst.

Once the committee concluded its presentation, the floor was opened for questions and comments from the audience.

Most of the questions centered on how the committee's findings would impact economic development. Many audience members were or are miners and said they realize the county's historical significance but are afraid that, if there is another hoop to jump through, they will no longer have jobs.

Impetus for the committee

The board formed the committee because as Interstate 70 was widened in the late 1990s, "things of historical importance ... were lost with no documentation or thought of preservation," according to Jo Ann Sorensen, a committee member who also is director of the county's land use division.

Sorensen said approximately 900 sites in the county have already been designated as historically significant, most of which are associated with mining.

"The purpose of historic preservation is to identify and evaluate cultural resources, figure out what is important about them, figure out what the county should do about them if they have importance, and then develop strategies or plans to actually take into account the effects of county actions," said David Cushman, a member of the committee.

Cushman said that, for example, the National Register of Historic Places does not mandate what private property owners can or cannot do with their properties. Cushman said there are three common myths associated with the National Register: eligible properties cannot be altered or modified; properties registered must be open to the public; the government can take property away from the private owner.

He emphasized that someone can nominate a site for historical preservation, but it is the property owner who chooses whether to accept this designation.

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