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August 10, 2011

Pitkin Iron to get help from county

ASPEN - Homeowners who've grappled with the cost of water and septic system woes virtually since they moved into the Pitkin Iron worker housing complex outside of Woody Creek will get financial help from Pitkin County, to the tune of \$62,305. That's the estimated cost of replacing two leach fields that are expected to fail. Homeowners have already incurred costs to repair and replace their water system and six leach fields, plus engineering fees and legal bills stemming from two lawsuits they pursued in response to the problems. In an impassioned debate Tuesday, county commissioners were sharply divided over how much to pay to help the homeowners association at Pitkin Iron, where 15 units are situated on a shelf of land below Highway 82 and above the Roaring Fork River, in unincorporated Pitkin County. Commissioner Rachel Richards pleaded with her colleagues to pick up the tab for replacing three leach fields (including one that has already been replaced) - about \$93,000 - and Commissioner Michael Owsley concurred. Homeowners shouldn't have to shoulder the cost of all the water and septic repairs that arose after they bought brand new units back in 2001, Richards argued. In a decade, they've incurred bills totaling close to \$200,000, including litigation, she noted. Work on the two remaining, questionable leach fields would bring the total to about \$245,000. "I think this is a pretty huge burden to put on 15 units," Richards said. The county at one time owned the Pitkin Iron property, including land on both sides of the river. Four free-market lots on the far side of the river were created as part of the project to help finance the worker housing. The county chose S & S Development to build the worker housing, and was repaid its land costs as part of the deal. Residents quickly discovered the well serving the development yielded such hard water that it was damaging plumbing and appliances. They split the cost of a water-softening system with the developers, but then discovered the salt produced by the system was damaging the leach fields serving the housing. They ultimately sued S & S and its partners, Tim Semrau (who would later serve as an Aspen city councilman) and Larry Saliterman, as well as their water engineers. A new well was drilled across the river, and a pipeline, attached to the old Pitkin Iron footbridge spanning the river, now serves the homes. They also sued the firm that recommended the soft-water system, but the suit was dismissed without a settlement in their favor. "It wasn't done right in the first place. We were a partner in how it wasn't done right," Richards said of the housing project. Owsley had harsh words for the developers and suggested that the county failed to hold them responsible, but commissioners Jack Hatfield, Rob Ittner and George Newman balked at absorbing all of the cost of repairing three leach fields. "You can't just come and expect a handout," Newman said. "This is very troublesome," Hatfield said, pondering how many other homeowners associations would turn to the county for help covering costs because they lack an adequate capital reserve fund paid through homeowners' dues. "Does that mean the associations line up at our door and come in and ask us for money? I hope not," he said. Some

commissioners expressed surprise that Pitkin Iron homeowners' dues have remained unchanged since 2007. The dues range from \$257 per month for a one-bedroom unit to \$425 per month for the four-bedroom residence. "I think my assessments have gone up twice since then," Hatfield said. "They should be raised tomorrow, in my mind," Ittner said. Pitkin Iron representatives said some homeowners are struggling, but that dues will increase now that they know what help they can expect from the county. Richards hinted that foreclosure is a possibility for some at the complex. janet@aspentimes.com

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