

WHAT'S UP WITH PITKIN COUNTY?

The Pitkin County Commissioners hold weekly work sessions on Tuesdays and bi-monthly public hearings on Wednesdays in the Plaza One building (next to the Courthouse) in Aspen. Both meetings are televised live and repeated on locater CG12 TV. They are also streamed live and available on the County website. Agendas are posted in the Aspen/Glenwood newspapers and on-line at www.aspenpitkin.com. In this column, your District 5 Commissioner, George Newman offers his take on current matters. You can reach him at george.newman@pitkincounty.com.

BOCC 2015 ANNUAL RETREAT

Our theme this year for our annual retreat was “change.” What will be the challenges this year internally for the County’s organization and externally for the Community? Change, of course, is inevitable. As Socrates once noted: “The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not into fighting the old but on building the new.” And as we move into 2015, we are literally building new as we address our capital needs.

We have begun the expansion and renovation of the Pitkin County Library. This project will provide a dedicated secure space just for children, a new better equipped and accessible community room, small group meeting rooms, and “makerspace” areas for specific activities. As reported earlier, we have begun an EA (environmental analysis) of the Pitkin County Airport with a broad cross section of the community providing input. We will begin to do outreach for the design of our new Public Safety (Sheriff’s) Building as well as the renovation of our existing administrative building (Plaza One) which is inefficient in energy use, office space and public meeting space.

We were presented with some interesting statistics and discussed what impacts, positive and negative they may present to the community. A February article in the Wall Street Journal rated Aspen 2nd highest in the percentage of increased prices for luxury homes out of 100 renowned cities around the World -- just a few percentage points behind NYC. Other interesting data came from a 2014 census using benchmarks from the years 2000-2013 from a variety of sources. Pitkin County saw a 17.3% increase in population to just over 17,000 residents. Employment increased by 6.3% over this period with approximately 22, 000 jobs today, with 84% of the jobs being service related. However, personal income rose by only 3.6% while average earnings per job decreased by 20.1% and per capita income decreased by 11.7%; making low wages obviously an issue. This, combined with our high cost of living and shortage of affordable housing means that out of those 22, 000 jobs, 14,000 workers commute to Pitkin County from outside the County.

This year our community panel discussion included the Mayors of Aspen, Snowmass Village and the Town of Basalt along with a real estate/property management firm owner and representative from the Aspen Ski Company. Several significant points and challenges were echoed by all. They included the need for more affordable housing, addressing transportation issues, the importance of our Airport, impact of climate change,

tackling the needs of our seniors within an aging community, and affordable and accessible health care.

We continue to work on our ongoing initiatives. Affordable and accessible health care through our participation with the Valley Health Alliance continues to be a priority. We are building a shared data base to look at cost/risks information, provide health fairs, and enlist providers willing to work on this model. Addressing mental health is still a challenge. While we have many non-profits that offer professional help, we must improve the public's knowledge and access to these resources.

Our broadband project and funding study is near completion. This market analysis will provide a financial model and prioritize locations to begin work with a provider. With two new cellular towers in Pitkin County, residents in those areas should soon notice improved service.

We continue to invest in workforce housing as well as pursuing public/private partnerships within Pitkin County. I continue to argue for better and safer transportation projects. We have recently seen success with our EOTC (elected officials transportation committee) committing several million dollars (generated from voter approved sales taxes) for a new underpass at the Basalt BRT/Highway 82 intersection; a new and improved Rubey Park transit center and paving of all commuter parking at Buttermilk. Of course, RFTA's BRT program has been extremely successful but the next challenge is to provide more commuter parking.

Finally, Pitkin County has just launched a new website of our own – separate from the City of Aspen – more interactive/user friendly, providing easier access to County departments and general information. Go to www.pitkincounty.com.

Solving pressing issues in our County and Valley demands a regional approach. From housing, health care, transportation and senior needs, not to mention protection of our environment, I continue to see the County as a leader: both a conveyer and a facilitator. Your comments are always welcome and appreciated.