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PitCo takes first step on smaller house sizes

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Landscaping on a new home constructed east of Aspen in September is shown. Pitkin County commissioners on Wednesday took the first step toward reducing the house-size cap to 9,250 square feet.

Aspen Daily News file

Pitkin County commissioners voted 5-0 on Wednesday to take the first step in reducing an interim house-size cap in unincorporated areas to a maximum of 9,250 square feet.

Commissioners vowed in September to act by the end of this year on some recommendations of the Community Growth Advisory Committee, an appointed body that worked for 10 months on proposals to achieve the county's goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. A key strategy in the committee's recommendations is reducing direct and indirect energy consumption by large homes.

The commissioners — who often fall victim to analysis paralysis on major issues — made good on their promise to take action in 2023.

“This is a really exciting day for me and I think for probably all board members to be finally taking some action on the recommendations of the growth committee, which worked really hard for 10 months and 21 meetings, I think,” said Commissioner Francie Jacober, chair of the board.

The interim 9,250-square-foot cap was approved on first reading. The board will hold a public hearing and second reading on Nov. 15. The commissioners made it clear that the proposed ordinances approved on Wednesday will face alterations during final review.

There currently is a 15,000-square-foot limit in most parts of unincorporated Pitkin County with pockets of more restrictive caps.

The first reading also includes zone districts which establish or maintain lower house-size caps in specific areas of Pitkin County. The Brush Creek area, Capitol Creek and Lower Snowmass Creek, and the Basalt urban growth boundary have caps of 5,750 square feet; Emma has a cap of 8,250 square feet.

As is common with Pitkin County's complicated land use code, there are exceptions to the rule. The commissioners said the proposed exceptions that allow houses larger than 9,250 square feet need to be massaged, but for now they include applications with vested rights for houses, pending applications that have been deemed complete, unexpired allotments from the county's Growth Management Quota System and certain applications of transferable development rights.

Pitkin County plans to take up to 18 months to work on the broader recommendations of the growth committee, which produced a 70-page report. The 26 members of the committee agreed on a recommendation for a house-size limit of 8,750 square feet. However, the committee recommended adopting an interim, less-restrictive cap to avoid getting bogged down in a political slugfest.

“There’s a concern that there’s going to be political pushback and that we might see a slow chipping away at the resolve of pursuing the full suite of recommendations,” committee co-chair Michael Miracle commissioners on Sept. 25.