

CIZ petitioners take on pr

By Mikaela Koski

SCN Reporter

Members of the Beartooth Front Coalition and supporters of the recent Citizen Initiated Zoning (CIZ) district efforts were recently able to let out all their frustrations.

The Stillwater County Commissioners held a public meeting recently regarding the proposed CIZ petition guidelines.

The guidelines detail recommended first steps, required steps including signature guidelines, and fees and action steps. The Beartooth Front petition would not be affected by the guidelines if implemented, but all future CIZ petitions would have to follow them.

At the hearing, no proponents were present, and 16 opponents voiced their opposition on various aspects of the proposed guidelines. By the time of the hearing, the commissioners had received 13 written comments, with one week still left in the public comment period.

Much of the opponents' disapproval related to the following themes.

MINERAL RIGHTS OWNERS

The guidelines require a list of affected property owners eligible to sign the petition, including "mineral/mining right owners ... when subsurface rights may be at risk."

As the county does not hold the records of mineral rights owners, an outside title company would be necessary to locate the owners.

Mike Lorash, a land manager from southern Stillwater County, spoke about his personal experience locating mineral rights owners. He said that after a cost of \$3,000, it was discovered that the 357-acre ranch he manages has 72 mineral rights owners.

"We have people that own 5/2,034 of an interest. It is on the verge of ridiculous," Lorash noted.

Several people voiced the opinion that mineral rights holders, who may not even live in the county, were being given preferential treatment in the guidelines over surface landowners

who are actually Stillwater County residents.

Bill Muldoon, a landowner in Fishtail, said that CIZ districts are intended to protect surface landowners who could be directly, and negatively, impacted by developments on the ground. He felt that mineral rights owners have other legal means to ensure that their rights are protected.

Muldoon believes a CIZ district, such as the one proposed by the Beartooth Front Coalition, could serve as a good check on oil or gas companies to ensure responsible development while also taking into account the needs of the surface owners. By allowing mineral interest holders a say in the petition, surface owners' influence in the decision would be diminished.

COST

In the guidelines, specific fees are outlined, including a \$450 application fee, a \$4 fee per certified name present on the petition, and the costs of certified mail postage and handling.

Other steps in the petition process may also incur costs including locating mineral rights owners and obtaining a finalized map of the proposed zone prepared by a certified land surveyor.

Several citizens discussed the costs related to a petition under such guidelines, noting that it could possibly be prohibitive and discourage citizens from taking on the process.

Burt Williams, a resident of Fishtail, explained that when the Beartooth Front Coalition looked into the matter, it would cost around \$3 per acre to locate the names of mineral rights owners. For an 80,000-acre proposed district like the Beartooth Front District, it would cost almost \$250,000 to simply locate the names.

Lana Sangmeister, of Nye, also discussed the associated costs of the guidelines, and noted that most of the commissioners' constituents are rural folks with limited means.

She also said the county would have to pay the cost of locating mineral rights owners as well, in order to verify the names on the peti-

Tri-County Victim/Witness Advocate program grant prompting shift

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Tri-County Victim/Witness Coordinator Manda Browning has advised the Columbus City Council of upcoming changes to the victim/witness advocate program.

Currently, the program serves three counties - Stillwater, Carbon, and Sweet Grass - and is funded by a Victims of Crime Act grant through the Montana Board of Crime Control. On June 30, 2019, the grant expires.

icipating in Career Day at Columbus Middle School and providing training on fire extinguisher use for the staff of the Super 8 hotel.

Fire Chief Rich Cowger reported that an EMT class currently being taught by EMS Coordinator and Assistant Chief Nick Jacobs is coming to a close. About eight or nine new EMTs will finish the class, and Cowger said most of those EMTs have asked to continue to work with CFR.