

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## Act now to preserve ranch land for tomorrow

An Aspen Times Editorial

**June 30, 2006**

Situation urgent. That's URGENT.

The current real estate boom in the Roaring Fork Valley is consuming the last large tracts of ranch land at an alarming rate. In the first six months of this year, 11,000 acres of ranch land have been sold.

Chenoa, a 5,000-acre spread near the Spring Valley Campus of Colorado Mountain College, is the largest to change hands this year. Others sold so far this year include:

- The 2,200-acre Lookout Mountain Ranch east of Glenwood Springs.
- The 1,800-acre Gould Ranch, a working cattle operation on Missouri Heights.
- The 1,600-acre Bershenyi Ranch near the entrance to Four Mile Canyon, off the road to Sunlight Mountain Resort.
- The 565-acre Hunt Ranch on Missouri Heights.

Someday soon, all five ranches above will likely undergo a radical transformation, from pasture and sage with a handful of ranch homes to manicured lawns with hundreds of large homes. Golfers driving carts on private courses will replace cowboys driving cattle across the open range. Talk about a change in scenery.

So what, if anything, can be done to keep the Roaring Fork Valley from looking like a retirement community in Florida? A few things come to mind.

First, the Pitkin County commissioners should go to voters this fall and ask for additional funding for the open space and trails program. Since its inception around 1990, the open space program has snuffed or severely limited development on 13,300 acres around the county, either by buying conservation easements or purchasing the land outright. In doing so, the program has exhausted most of its funding. A shot in the pocketbook from voters would allow it to continue the good work of protecting the landscape that drew so many of us to Colorado.

Eagle County, with its fledgling open space program, should also take the case for open space to the voters and ask for more money. A cash infusion would allow conservationists there to look for preservation opportunities on Missouri Heights and in the Roaring Fork and Fry-pan valleys.

Private donors might consider giving their money to the Aspen Valley Land Trust, which has been working to preserve ranch land in portions of the valley governed by Garfield County, the least conservation-minded of the valley's three county governments.

But for any conservation effort to work, it takes the cooperation, and sacrifice, of folks still working the land. Ranchers must be engaged in the conversation and, when it finally comes down to it, offered reasonable sums to preserve their land.

Voter support for existing open-space programs, working with private donors, can make that possible. As a

community, we must act together now, before an urgent situation turns dire.

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