

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## Historic purchase will preserve ranch land

**By Scott Condon**  
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The East Mesa area outside of Carbondale is classic Colorado.

The pastures in a bucolic bowl are interrupted only by an occasional ranch house, barn, hay shed or machine shop. Cattle mosey throughout the area, browsing on the grass that still pokes up through the light blanket of snow.

The bowl rises to the shrub-covered hills of the Crown to the east. A juniper forest and the humble but picturesque white church of St. Mary's of the Crown mark the west side. In the distance to the north is Missouri Heights and Cottonwood Pass.

Majestic Mount Sopris looms large on the south end of the mesa.

Some of that classic landscape will be preserved for perpetuity. Aspen Valley Land Trust is working on an agreement to acquire conservation easements on 200 acres owned by the John Nieslanik family.

The property is special enough that AVLT plans to alter its policy of avoiding purchases by convincing land owners to gift property or easements.

The land trust, the oldest in Colorado, holds conservation easements on 61 pieces of property, encompassing 9,400 acres. Nearly all those easements came as gifts, according to Martha Cochran, AVLT director.

To purchase these easement, AVLT applied for grants and received \$450,000 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and \$250,000 from Great Outdoors Colorado. Another \$250,000 is being sought. The Pitkin County Open Space and Trails Program is assessing whether or not to participate.

Cochran said AVLT is willing to alter its approach to conservation because the Nieslanik property is a vital link between Carbondale and the backcountry lands beyond.

The agreement with the Nieslanik family would prohibit development but provide the opportunity to preserve the agricultural uses. The Nieslaniks would surrender the long-term financial advantages of selling the property for development, but they would receive immediate tax benefits that could help them continue ranching, explained Cochran.

John Nieslanik's 200 acres is kind of like the bull's eye in a dart board. It's close to the middle of the big naturally shaped bowl that comprises East Mesa. His property is flanked by land owned by Paul Nieslanik on one side and Bob Nieslanik on the other. Terry Considine owns a massive ranch adjacent to the Nieslaniks.

Land nearly developed

East Mesa sits on a bench just outside of Carbondale's town limits.

A year ago, it looked like the mesa was destined for a different fate. The Snowmass Land Co., a high-end



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residential development firm in Snowmass Village, had an option to buy Paul Nieslanik's land. However, the company didn't renew the option this summer, according to president John Sarpa.

After months of talking to neighbors and community leaders, Sarpa said, the development firm didn't see how it could come up with a plan that would be successful in both gaining approval and being financially viable.

Snowmass Land Co. looked at a plan that would have combined selling residential lots for the valley's working class as well as the wealthy. Preservation of a substantial amount of open space was also a key component.

"I think conservation is critical," Sarpa said. "We just couldn't come up with the right formula."

Some observers felt clustered development was acceptable in return for preservation of most of the land. Others wanted all the land preserved, said Sarpa.

The Snowmass Land Co. was also concerned that Carbondale land-use reviews could be subject to citizen votes, as the fight over the Crystal River Marketplace proved. Voters rejected that shopping mall last summer after the council approved it.

"That weighed into the decision," Sarpa acknowledged.

Preservation of a neighboring piece of land was a perfect project for Aspen Valley Land Trust, which merged last fall with another local conservation group, the Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund.

The combined organization's mission is to "permanently conserve lands for agriculture, open space, wildlife and recreation."

The deal with John Nieslanik's family is expected to be signed next spring. The Nieslaniks could not be reached Thursday for comment.

Securing a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture was key to the agreement. AVLTL applied for funds through the Farmland Protection Program. The program exists, according to the agriculture department's Web site, "to help purchase development rights to keep productive farmland in agricultural uses."

East Mesa has some of the best, bona fide farmland in the Roaring Fork Valley, according to Shannon Meyer, associate director of AVLTL. While most of the ground in the valley is dominated by river rock, East Mesa is known for its relatively rock-free, high-quality soil.

Cochran said AVLTL sees tremendous opportunity for further conservation on East Mesa. She said there are no guarantees that any other lands will be preserved, but the effort is off to a great start.

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