

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## Please pitch in to preserve our back yard

Just about everyone who lives in the Aspen area has made the trek through the majestic Elk Mountains to Crested Butte, and everyone who has taken that journey probably agrees that it passes through some of the most beautiful country to be found anywhere.

But not many people know that the amazing mountains and valleys they are hiking through are under constant threat from development, and they are likely unaware of the heroic effort to make sure that the scenic High Elk Corridor is forever protected from development.

While the majority of the land is protected as wilderness, there are some 1,000 mining claims and homesites totaling 6,000 acres in the corridor that potentially could be developed. Most are in the Schofield Park area and haven't been developed simply because they are so remote. That could change at any time.

As detailed in Paul Andersen's article in this edition of the Aspen Times Weekly, a few forward-thinking souls recognized back in 1996 that the untouched beauty could be pockmarked with development someday, and that efforts needed to get under way quickly to buy and preserve as many of those privately owned sites as possible.

Chief among them was an unlikely partner - Crested Butte Mountain Resort, which obviously could have seen financial gain by encouraging development in some of those areas. The resort actually helped jump-start the effort to preserve the corridor by joining with the Crested Butte Land Trust and Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory in Gothic to buy the historic Schofield townsite in 1997 for \$490,000.

Since then, the preservation drive has grown like wildfire. Soon after the Wilderness Land Trust in Aspen got involved and helped save the historic West Maroon trailhead, other groups got on board, including the Aspen Valley Land Trust, High Country Citizen's Alliance, International Mountain Biking Association, Gunnison County, Pitkin County and Crested Butte. The group is now known as the Friends of High Elk.

The effort, however, got its biggest boost last year when the nationwide Trust for Public Land got on board. Well-known for saving thousands of acres of critical backcountry throughout the United States, the TPL has the resources to get this job done. They have already completed detailed mapping of the area and identified 2,000 acres that are the most critical parcels.

In order to save all that land, Friends of High Elk needs about \$6.5 million. The group plans to raise \$3 million through grants and public sources, but the other \$3.5 million needs to come from private donors.

So we are encouraging everyone - businesses, preservation groups, governments and individuals - to do what they can to help this effort. Whether you can afford \$20 or \$20,000, this is our back yard, and we have a vested interest in doing all we can to save it. No one wants to see dream cabins and speculative homes dotting what is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful places on Earth.

Please, get on board and do your part. For information, call the TPL at (303) 837-1414, or the Aspen Valley Land Trust at 963-8440.


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