

THE ASPEN TIMES

Independence finally lands in public's hands

By Scott Condon
Aspen Times Staff Writer
 January 13, 2004

The ghost town of Independence, one of the Aspen area's most cherished historic sites, is finally in public hands.

A long-negotiated land swap designed to transfer ownership of 160 acres at the old mining camp to the U.S. Forest Service was completed Thursday.

"It was a very sweet little deal," said Martha Cochran, executive director of the Aspen Valley Land Trust.

AVLT bought the property for \$1.1 million in 2001 with the help of several partners. The land trust rushed to save the old ghost town after it was listed for sale and facing potential development.

Independence is a tourist magnet and a history buff's mecca. It has a refurbished cabin and ruins of several structures, including an old mill. The town is located along the headwaters of the Roaring Fork River, surrounded by the towering peaks of the Continental Divide.

It was settled on the Fourth of July, 1879, when prospectors found gold and silver.

The property that AVLT bought included about three-fourths of the cabins and ruins plus the old mill, Cochran said. The acreage was split by Highway 82.

AVLT's goal has always been to get the property into Forest Service ownership. "We're not really the best people to manage land," said Cochran.

Transferring the land to the Forest Service wasn't as simple as it sounds. A second-home owner in Edwards, an unincorporated area west of Vail, played a critical role. The homeowner, Robert Levine, wanted to acquire 116 acres of Forest Service land that was outside his window. That federal land was surrounded by private property.

Levine hired Western Lands Group, which specializes in swaps of public and private land, to assist. As part of the deal pieced together by Western Lands Group, Levine gave a \$700,000 interest-free loan to AVLT to help with the Independence town site purchase. The loan was made with the understanding that it would be "forgiven" if Independence was involved in a land trade, Cochran said.

Levine's deal ultimately gave the Forest Service three parcels in return for the 116 acres by his house, according to his attorney, John Dunn of Vail. The Forest Service acquired 124 acres on Card Creek, south of Edwards; 31 acres near Pitkin Lake, north of Vail; and the 160 acres at the Independence town site.

Dunn said the Card Creek property had been subdivided as part of the speculation over Colorado landing the Winter Olympics in the 1970s. It was never developed.

The Pitkin Lake property was an inholding of private land surrounded by wilderness. It is at the end of a popular trail.


[Print Friendly](#)

[Email This Story](#)


All three properties were highly coveted by the Forest Service, Dunn noted.

“From this case, from our perspective, there was a lot of benefit to us,” said Barry Sheakley, a lands forester with the White River National Forest supervisor’s office. “This was a good one on both sides. We wish they could all be like this.”

The land Levine acquired won’t be part of a huge Eagle County-style development. The limited development will include a trail and possibly a couple of cabins, Dunn said. Conservation easements prohibiting further development were granted to the Eagle Valley Land Trust.

Cochran said Levine’s intent to conserve the land he acquired made the deal even more palatable.

[Scott Condon’s e-mail address is scondon@aspentimes.com]

[BACK](#) 