

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## Eagle County has easy choice

An Aspen Times Editorial

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It seems like the Eagle County commissioners have a preservation no-brainer on their hands.

They've got a large, undeveloped property on Missouri Heights in the form of the McNulty Ranch.

They've got owners who would rather see it remain a ranch than become a subdivision, and are willing to do just about whatever it takes to place a conservation easement over their land so that they can continue ranching.

They've got an open space fund designed specifically to purchase such easements.

And they've got a unanimous recommendation from the Eagle County Open Space Fund Advisory Board in favor of protecting the property.

So what's taking the county commissioners so long to spend the money and protect the land?

One of the commissioners, outgoing Republican Tom Stone, has said he won't vote in favor of preserving the land. The other two - Arn Menconi and Peter Runyon - are giving it a close look. There are some issues to consider before spending \$1.9 million in taxpayer money.

For instance, the 753-acre ranch is surrounded by private property. Protecting it would not give wildlife direct access to the backcountry. Even so, preserving such a large chunk of land provides refuge, nonetheless, for both humans and animals.

Then, there's the Garfield County problem. The ranch is split between Garfield and Eagle counties, with 466 acres located in the latter. Garfield County doesn't have a dedicated fund for open space, and two of its county commissioners are contemptuous of preserving open space. So, Eagle County would be spending money without any support from its neighbor government.

But the McNultys, with the help of the Aspen Valley Land Trust, have applied for a grant from the state Division of Wildlife. If the money is forthcoming, there will be a way to pay for protecting the Garfield County portion of the ranch.

Also, the ranch is in a remote corner of Eagle County, visible only to the people who live there or happen to wander there for a bike ride or some other reason. But, the preservation of open space is critical in all parts of the county.

It's rare that such a large parcel is available for preservation. Eagle County voters have made it clear that open space preservation is a priority. The commissioners should spend the money and save this remarkable parcel. They may never have it this easy again.

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