

THE ASPEN TIMES

Ranch may be saved for \$2 million

Eagle County open space committee recommends protecting land in southwestern Eagle County

By Scott N. Miller
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Sara McNulty may appreciate the size of the Rocky Mountain west more than most.

A native of Northern Ireland, McNulty moved to husband Gary's family ranch in the late 1970s. Now she wants to protect the ranch - which has been in the family since the 1880s - on the Roaring Fork Valley side of Cottonwood Pass and leave it for her daughters and their children.

The McNultys have asked for \$1.9 million from the Eagle County's open space fund. In exchange for that money, the McNultys will sign a contract, called a "conservation easement", that will place virtually all of the ranch off-limits to development. The contract would allow only five new homes to ever be built on the 1,100-acre ranch.

"I'm a great believer in protecting the beautiful things in Colorado," McNulty said.

Among those things, she said, are mountain ranches.

To do that, though, the contract first had to be approved by the Eagle County Open Space Advisory Committee. That group hears requests for open space money, then sends its recommendations to the Eagle County Commissioners, who actually spend the money.

The board unanimously voted to recommend purchasing a conservation easement on the McNulty ranch, but not without some reservations. The big issue in board chairman Ron Wolfe's mind was the lack of financial support from Garfield's County.

Garfield County's conservative commissioners for years have pleaded poverty when it comes to purchasing open space. And while the county's financial situation has changed with the oil and gas boom, its hostility toward open space preservation has not.

Nevertheless, Wolfe asked if Garfield County could be contacted for a contribution.

That's unlikely, said Shannon Meyer, associate director of the Aspen Valley Land Trust.

"They just do not give out money for projects like this," Meyer said.

The roughly 60 percent of the ranch that's in Eagle County will be subject to the contract forbidding development. The part of the ranch in Garfield County will be protected if the Colorado Division of Wildlife comes through with money from its new wildlife habitat protection funds.

That's a new, well-funded program with few applicants, Meyer said. If the state money doesn't come through, McNulty said she'll protect the Garfield County part of the ranch through the sale of tax credits.

That state program allows a land owner to exchange the right to develop property for tax credits. Those credits can then be sold for immediate cash.

In the end, the open space board agreed with member Michael Bair's lobbying.

"Almost all the ranches around this one have been divided into 35-acre parcels or smaller," Bair said. "This is one of the last that's still standing. This is in an area that's booming with growth."

Casting her vote to send the deal to the commissioners, board member New New Wallace said she wants it clear that the county's money will only be spent on the part of the ranch that's in Eagle County.

"We need to be clear that's all we're doing," Wallace said.

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