

THE ASPEN TIMES

40 Years of Stewardship

Scott Condon

September 8, 2007

 [Comments \(0\)](#)  [Print](#)  [Email](#)

It is doubtful that even Don Quixote would dream of trying to save land from development in the Roaring Fork Valley these days.

The real estate market has gone hog-wild over the last five years and pushed property values into the stratosphere. The average sales price for large homes soared over \$6 million in Aspen. Affordable housing became a distant memory in New Castle, Silt and Rifle. Developers continue to scramble for the last remaining open land from Basalt to Parachute.

Ranches that were home to cattle for 100 years or more seem to sprout trophy homes almost overnight to satisfy the next wave of baby boomers seeking second homes.

Despite those powerful market forces, Aspen Valley Land Trust got busier in recent years. The nonprofit organization preserves land for agriculture, recreation and wildlife habitat by collecting conservation easements that limit or prohibit development.

Since 2004, AVLT has doubled the number of acres it holds in conservation, and had its most successful year in 2006. Its 30 conservation projects last year protected 5,200 acres from development.

Executive Director Martha Cochran expects to exceed that accomplishment in 2007, the year that marks its 40th anniversary.



Martha Cochran has been executive director of Aspen Valley Land Trust since 2002, and has overseen the preservation of thousands of acres of open space in the Roaring Fork and Colorado river valleys. (Jordan Curet/Aspen Times Weekly)

[Click to Enlarge](#)

Changing with the times



The historic coke ovens in Redstone, clearly visible from Highway 133, were preserved through partnerships with several organizations in 2004. (ED KOSMICKI)

[Click to Enlarge](#)

The organization's four decades of surviving and thriving have forced it to evolve with changing market conditions and find creative ways to convince some landowners to conserve rather than sell to the highest bidder.

Former AVLT Executive Director Reid Haughey said sophistication and knowledge of complex tax codes are requirements for an organization that often must placate wealthy landowners who employ legions of lawyers and accountants. He likened AVLT to a kid who faced tough standards in swimming lessons.

"The trust from the very beginning was swimming in the deep end of the pool," said Haughey, who led the organization from 1999 to 2002.

At 40 years of age, AVLT is the oldest land trust in Colorado and one of the more successful. It holds conservation easements on 22,402 acres stretching from Aspen to Parachute. It helped broker land swaps that placed the ghost town of Independence and a parcel

near Ashcroft in the hands of the U.S. Forest Service.

AVLT depends on the altruistic nature of landowners, most notably ranchers. It doesn't mount financial campaigns to buy land for preservation. The organization has only \$5.2 million in net assets, which Cochran called a "drop in the bucket" compared to land values in the region. It pulled in about \$605,000 in revenues in 2005, according to the most recent records filed with the Internal Revenue Service, so it will never be a buyer in this market.

Fortunately, there are landowners willing to donate conservation easements. They preserve their land but surrender hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars in lost profits they could rake in from sales.

"There are people who value something more than money," Cochran said.

Tax credits entice donors

A landowner who gives a conservation easement to a land trust makes a binding agreement to limit or prohibit development. In return, they may be able to keep using the land for agriculture. Ranching families, for instance, cut deals that allow future generations to continue producing hay or cattle.

Landowners also receive state tax credits that they can sell to raise cash or use to reduce their property tax bills. Colorado offers some of the most generous tax incentives for people who conserve their land.

The federal government also gives tax deductions to landowners who grant conservation easements. Those deductions will expire this year, however, if they aren't renewed by Congress.

In many of the deals it arranges, AVLT provides legal and accounting expertise for landowners who consider granting an easement. The trust also monitors properties once it secures an easement to make sure the agreement is honored.

AVLT celebrates its 40th anniversary this year at its annual "Save the Land Dance" party and fundraiser at the picturesque Strang Ranch in Missouri Heights. It's a fitting location. During its 40 years, AVLT's focus has shifted from providing parks in Aspen to preserving ranches in rural Pitkin, Eagle and Garfield counties.



The 78-acre Rock Bottom Ranch near El Jebel was acquired in cooperation with the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies in 1999, and includes a heron rookery. (Ed Komicki) [Click to Enlarge](#)

Focus shifts to ranches

Mike and Kit Strang worked with AVLT to place conservation easements on about half of their 463-acre ranch in Missouri Heights, and they are in the process of placing restrictions on another quarter of the spread.

Their cattle and horse ranch is bordered on two sides by former ranches that have been carved into expensive rural lots. Development will likely consume another couple of ranches nearby.

The Strangs couldn't stomach the thought of going in that direction. Conservation was more appealing to them and their four children.

It's not a decision that works for everyone, said Kit, who formerly served on AVLT's board of directors. "You have to have a deep sense of having the ranch stay agriculture or open," she said.

Mike agrees that a deep-rooted love of the land steered his family's direction toward conservation. "In my case, there is a revulsion of chopping the ranch



In order to preserve three-quarters of the 400-acre Lawrence Ranch in Missouri Heights, AVL T partnered with a development company that will put homes on the remainder. The controversial step marked a move into more complex land deals for AVL T. (Jordan Curet/Aspen Times Weekly) [Click to Enlarge](#)

into pieces for people that don't love the land," he said. (See more about the Strangs' decision in the related story.)

AVLT roots go back to 1966 when John Doremus, Eve Homeyer and Francis Whitaker created the Parks Association. Hal Clark was the first director. The following year it created a separate, tax-exempt nonprofit called Park Trust to advocate for preservation of open space. Park Trust is AVL T's direct ancestor.

When Pitkin County established an open space and trails program with a tax-fueled budget and paid staff in 1990, Park Trust decided to change its focus. It became Aspen Valley Land Trust in 1992 and new executive director Chuck Vidal concentrated on educating landowners and tax professionals on the benefits of granting conservation easements.

Controversial steps

The board of directors also realized the group's focus needed to expand downvalley. That presented a problem, since the name "Aspen" had an uppity, negative connotation.

"Soon after the name change, the board began to have second thoughts about their name choice," says the organization's official, internal history.

"There was unanimous agreement that the name was not ideal because it was too restrictive and created animosity from downvalley landowners, but no suitable alternative was found."

Haughey, the AVL T's first full-time director, took the helm from Vidal in 1999 and launched AVL T's big push to actively pursue conservation easements; since then AVL T has increased the amount of land under its conservation umbrella by roughly 400 percent. The organization undertook one of its few controversial steps in 2001 when it scrambled to try to prevent the Lawrence Ranch in Missouri Heights, the oldest continuously worked ranch in the valley, from being sold in 35-acre parcels.

Without money to buy land, AVL T went in a new direction and teamed with a development firm called Snowmass Land Co. AVL T bought 400 acres of the Lawrence Ranch for \$4 million and sold the property to Snowmass Land Co. for the same amount. As part of the deal, AVL T was a co-applicant with the development firm for 26 large homes on rural lots. The project won approval from Garfield County. Snowmass Land Co. developed the Ranch at Coulter Creek project and placed conservation easements on the remaining 309 of the 400 acres.

The project "created a great deal of controversy because of the level of development and AVL T's perceived subsidy of development," the organization's internal history says.

Haughey said the project ultimately worked, however, and represented another arrow in AVL T's quiver. He said the Lawrence Ranch deal sparked healthy internal debate by the board of directors at the time over the limits of what it would do to conserve land.

"One of the real assets of AVL T has always been really smart board members," he said.

Race against time

Haughey left AVL T in 2002 to head the Wilderness Land Trust, which



Carter Jackson, 84, donated a conservation easement on his 292-acre ranch to AVL T in 2003. The property south of Glenwood Springs remains a working ranch. (Paul Conrad/Aspen Times Weekly) [Click to Enlarge](#)



AVLT was launched in order to preserve park lands in and around Aspen, but over the years has gradually shifted its conservation focus west, to the middle Roaring Fork Valley and now western Garfield County.

[Click to Enlarge](#)

preserves privately owned lands that qualify as wilderness, and Cochran became the leader of AVLT. In October 2003, the organization merged with the Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund, which had concentrated on preserving agricultural land around Carbondale. The Heritage Fund's director, Shannon Meyer, took over as AVLT's associate director.

AVLT remains active in Pitkin County - it played a role in the preservation of the Child and Harvey ranches in Snowmass Valley and is working with George Stranahan to preserve his ranch along Woody Creek. But AVLT has shifted much of its focus farther downvalley, to Garfield County.

"The big acreage [of private land in the region] is to the west of Glenwood," said Cochran.

About 84 percent of Pitkin County's 627,000 acres are federal land, leaving about 100,000 in private hands. About 63 percent of Garfield County's 1.9 million acres are federally held, leaving about 700,000 acres in private hands. In other words, Garfield County has about seven times as much private land as Pitkin.

A 2005 study by an organization called the Colorado Conservation Trust ranked Garfield County as one of 16 in Colorado facing the highest threat of development and population increases with the lowest potential for open space purchases.

Pitkin County was rated in better shape because of the county government's open space program. Despite huge pressure from oil and gas development, and the associated influx of workers, Garfield County has no such program. AVLT is trying to fill the void. The staff spends a great deal of its time working with ranchers in areas around Silt and Rifle on conservation deals.

The Divide Creek-Dry Hollow project is shaping up as one of one of AVLT's greatest success stories. Eighteen ranchers in the area share a goal of preserving their ranching heritage. They have already given conservation easements to 2,800 acres. As more of their neighbors join the effort, it could lead to the preservation of 10,000 acres, Cochran said.

But it's not all success stories. More than 11,000 acres of ranch land in the Roaring Fork drainage, including the Fryingpan and Crystal valleys, changed hands in 2006, according to AVLT board president Dave Bellack. Most of that land was purchased for development.

"I do get disappointed because these opportunities don't grow on trees," Bellack said.

With land disappearing and prices soaring, AVLT's life expectancy seems limited, but Cochran vowed it will continue to play a vital role because there are still landowners who want their property to remain undeveloped. Her staff contacts owners or representatives of every large parcel that goes on the market and AVLT takes a proactive approach to some special lands it believes deserve preservation.

In some recent cases AVLT has donated money to grease the skids on conservation deals, and it has lobbied public officials in local counties to help preserve ranches. That action shows "how limited we feel the time is" to preserve land in the valley, Cochran said.

"We feel we have a very short timeline," she said. "It's exacerbated by the land prices, but it's just the volume of activity and it's in every inch of our territory."

Scott Condon's e-mail address is scondon@aspentimes.com.

[BACK](#) 