



Glenwood Springs

Post Independent

Land swap best in nation

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 May 2, 2005

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EDWARDS - The U.S. Forest Service recognized a Lake Creek land swap that concluded in January 2004 as the best example of a public-private property exchange in the country.

Private landowner Robert Levine gave the Forest service 301 acres in West Lake Creek, and other areas, in return for 119 acres of federal land in the area of his home near the popular Baryeta Cabin Road south of Edwards. The land was valued at \$4.5 million.

Levine gave the Forest Service 121 acres in Card Creek, a tributary to Lake Creek; 31 acres in the Eagles Nest Wilderness near Pitkin Lake northeast of Vail; and 148 acres of wetlands and uplands near the historic Independence townsite at the base of Independence Pass near Aspen.

The Forest Service says the parcels it received contained high-quality habitat for lynx and other big game, and that the swap brought potentially developable land under federal protection.

The Independence Pass parcel also has some historic buildings included on the National Historic Register.

Lots of meetings

It took multiple organizations - the Forest Service; the Western Land Group, which specializes in land exchanges; the Eagle Valley Land Trust; the Aspen Valley Land Trust and Pitkin County - to make the exchange occur.

"It was an extraordinary exchange," said Cindy Cohagen, director of the Eagle Valley Land Trust, a preservation group. "All the pieces of property in the swap are tremendous properties."

Levine purchased the disparate parcels then transferred them to private ownership under the respective land trusts. He also imposed a permanent "conservation easement," which limits what he can build on his new land.

Adjacent landowners can cross Levine's property to get to Forest Service land, said his attorney, John Dunn.

"The Forest Service got two prime pieces and an historic site," said Dunn. "How many exchanges have that much whammy to them?"

Forbes Magazine listed Levine as the 388th wealthiest person in the world, with a net worth estimated at \$625 million. He founded Cabletron, a cable-networking company, with Craig Benson, now governor of New

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One of the company's highest-profile projects was providing networking for the Soviet Mir space station, Dunn said.

Smooth sailing

The exchange generated scant opposition. In fact, there were no appeals, said Howard Kahlow, a forest service lands specialist.

In an interview shortly after the two years it took to complete exchange, Kahlow said the deal occurred at "lightning speed."

"It was a good proposal," Kahlow said. "The Forest Service got something of value, and the proponent assumed a lot of the expense making it happen."

Pitkin County contributed \$100,000 for the open space at Independence Pass and the Aspen Valley Land Trust contributed \$370,000. To help equalize the value of the parcels being exchanged, as federal law requires, Levine contributed \$187,000 cash. Levine also paid for the surveying and biological study on the land.

"It took a lot of people working together," said the Forest Service's Cal Wettstein, the head ranger in Eagle County. "I'm really proud the chief of the Forest Service recognized it as the best in the system last year."

The Forest Service presented Cohagen with a plaque honoring the trust's participation in the exchange.

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