

CONSERVATION-MINDED CITIZENS ARE BANDING TOGETHER

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If there were a single demographic trend that characterized the last decade of the 20th Century, it was Americans heading West, both to take advantage of the burgeoning high-tech economy and to enjoy a quality of life typified by wide-open spaces and recreational opportunities. According to the United States Census Bureau, the intermountain West is America's growth hot spot-populations in the six-state Rocky Mountain region are up an estimated 20.2 percent over the past ten years, compared with a national growth rate of 2.2 percent. Though much of that growth is taking place in prosperous cities such as Denver, Las Vegas, Albuquerque, and Salt Lake, it's the outlying rural areas that have doubled, even tripled in populace and size. Demographers refer to these areas as "exurbia:" rural enclaves that surround metropolitan cities.

But the exodus isn't limited to places like Pahrump, Nev., Park City, Utah, and Parker, Colo., all located within commuting distance of major cities. Any place with a landing strip for private planes or at a bare minimum, decent communications infrastructure to support "modern cowboys" (high-tech workers who use computer internets to link to the home office) has development potential.

In many rural areas, farmers, ranchers, and conservation-minded citizens are banding together to thwart development and preserve open space. And one of their main weapons is the conservation easement -- basically, a purchase of development rights (PDR) that prevents the land from being subdivided or sold for non-agricultural purposes in perpetuity. In the mountain towns of Crested Butte, Colo., Park City, Utah, Jackson, Wyo., and Steamboat Springs, the development rights to ranch lands long used to raise cattle and horses have been bought up to staunch the creeping growth of development.

But land preservation isn't limited to land within site of a ski resort: rural areas of Boulder, Colo., and ranching communities throughout sparsely-populated Southern Colo., Utah, and New Mexico have also organized to acquire PDRs, often in conjunction with state programs (eighteen states currently have active PDR programs) or with the help of conservation-minded organizations with "land trusts" such as the Elk Foundation. In areas where development is taking place, agricultural property values tend to be much lower than the value for development. When the owner sells his development rights, he receives a lump sum based on an independent appraisal; the organization or government entity that now owns the development rights then retires any future option to develop the land. The property owner typically reaps a tax reward, too, because the land's valuation is reduced when development rights are subtracted.

Selling PDRs doesn't mean the property owner gives up other rights, such as the right to restrict public access or to sell the property. About 400,000 acres of land has been placed in conservation easements since 1974, when the first PDR program was established in New York. Because keeping and raising horses is considered an agricultural pursuit, horse owners in communities being pressured by urban sprawl may reap the same benefits accorded to vegetable farmers, wheat growers, or cattle ranchers. In fact, because horse properties tend to be aggregated around the very communities that are rapidly expanding, horseman may be the first and best line of defense in slowing urban sprawl. While zoning has been one means of controlling urban growth, it is invasive because it deprives the property owner of some of the value of his property. In the conservative Western states, zoning that restricts property rights can be politically untenable. Building moratoria has similar legal, social and economic disadvantages. However, PDR programs are voluntary and allow landowners to profit from the value of their lands.

Therefore, horsemen and ranchers concerned with development may prove to be important allies of conservationists, environmentalists, local and state governments in preserving our nation's precious open spaces.

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