

## Realtors buy into wilderness protection

Aspen board lending weight to conservationists

By [Scott Condon](#)

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Aspen-area real estate agents are proving they want to preserve some parts of the Roaring Fork Valley rather than sell every square inch.

The Aspen Board of Realtors formed a special committee called Realtors for Wilderness earlier this year to help efforts to preserve federal lands. The committee aims to eventually raise funds for Wilderness Workshop, the oldest and most prominent local environmental group in the valley. An extra benefit might be a boost to the image of the real estate industry.

"The image of Realtors isn't the greatest in the valley," said Bob Starodoj, a longtime Aspen real estate agent and a co-chairman of Realtors for Wilderness. "The fact that we sell real estate doesn't make us bad guys."

The committee took its first step to preserve public lands Thursday by calling on the Colorado Roadless Area Review Task Force to protect all 84 inventoried roadless areas in the White River National Forest.

The task force is holding a public meeting Wednesday in Glenwood Springs. It is collecting public opinion across the state and will make a recommendation to Gov. Bill Owens in July on whether specific roadless lands to preserve.

Realtors for Wilderness said in a letter to the task force that preservation of undeveloped lands makes good business sense. The 625 members of the Aspen Board of Realtors sold more than \$2 billion in real estate in Pitkin, Eagle and Garfield counties last year.

"Much of the added value of real estate in our resort economy is a measure of the quality-of-life benefits of the absence of roads and development on public lands that surround our area," the Realtors' letter said.

[Dave Reed](#), a spokesman for [Wilderness Workshop](#), said the Realtors' letter "lends a whole lot of extra credibility" to the local effort to preserve roadless areas in the White River National Forest, which surrounds the Roaring Fork Valley.

"This is an important voice," Reed said. "In general, economic arguments carry the day, more so than a bunch of greenies saying, 'We want to preserve these lands so we can continue hiking them ... .'"

Craig Ward, an Aspen real estate agent known for his conservation efforts, said the partnership between conservation groups and Realtors seems like a natural one to him. Many real estate agents are among Aspen's most avid outdoor adventurers, he said, and virtually all of them recognize that much of Aspen's allure among clients and potential clients is because of the great outdoors. Many people who move to the valley are attracted by the skiing, fishing and hiking opportunities, he said.

"I don't think you'll find any Realtors against aiding and helping the wilderness effort," Ward said. Starodoj credited Ward for playing a key role in creating the Realtors for Wilderness. Ward is also a co-chairman of the committee, along with Bill Stirling.

Ward said he envisions Realtors for Wilderness playing a much greater role in preservation efforts beyond the roadless debate. One key role could be raising funds for Wilderness Workshop, assuring

it can continue its duty as watchdog for public lands. He hopes the Aspen Board of Realtors' efforts inspire real estate agents in other parts of Colorado to take similar action.

Starodoj said a partnership between the real estate association and the Wilderness Workshop could greatly benefit both groups.

"The real estate community here has made a lot of money. This is a good cause. There's money out there for environmental causes," he said.

And Realtors just might earn some respect.

"Some day we can maybe have status above used-car salesmen," Starodoj said with a laugh.

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