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FOLLOW ME TO THE TREE! Santa and Mrs. Claus led townsfolk to the town Christmas tree for a lighting ceremony on Saturday, December 4. For more photos see page 30. PHOTO BY ALEX FENLON

Town tapped to get huge grant awards from GOCO

Ice rink roof and more open space...

[BY MARK REAMAN]

The Town of Crested Butte received more than \$1.7 million in grants from the Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) board of directors Wednesday. In theory, the money could help provide a roof over the Crested Butte ice rink by next winter and will help finish up the second phase of a major open space project near Crested Butte.

With almost \$2 million granted to four projects in the county, \$1,005,000 will go toward helping secure 110 acres in the Kochevar open space parcel just north of town. Another \$700,000 will be earmarked for a roof over the open air Big Mine ice rink. The roof project is estimated to cost \$1.15 million and the town has \$200,000 allocated for the project in the 2011 budget.

The open space money will go to fund a large part of phase 2 of the Kochevar project.

"We are grateful to GOCO and all the partners that made this project possible," said Crested Butte mayor Leah Williams. "There's the county Land Preservation Board, the 1% for Open Space organization, the Crested Butte Land Trust, the Trust for Public Lands [TPL], and the Kochevar family. They all made this project happen."

This is phase 2 of the Kochevar project and secures 110 acres of the total 322-acre parcel. The town is putting in \$400,000 for this phase as well. The Land Preservation board and 1% for Open Space organization are both putting in \$100,000. The TPL will add about \$4,000 to cover closing costs. 1% for Open Space is also contributing \$10,000 for the stewardship endowment. The \$5,000 on top of the million dollars from GOCO is also earmarked for stewardship.

"It's a great project," said Town Planner John Hess. "This is the final request we have for GOCO but we'll still owe the TPL \$749,000 for the remaining 42 acres in the third and final phase."

The entire project encompasses 322 acres in preserved land plus 70 acres that have a conservation easement that allows two building envelopes. Last year, GOCO awarded \$2 million to the TPL to fund the first phase of the Kochevar project that resulted in the transfer of 170 acres. That land will be used for preservation, recreation trails, and the protection of agricultural and wildlife use.

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Going postal? Mt. Crested Butte is looking for mail on the mountain

"It's a possibility, but not definite"

[BY MIKE HORN]

Mail service on the mountain's tumultuous past spans four decades. What started as a quest to develop a sense of community identity in the late 1970s has today become a thorn in the side of Mt. Crested Butte residents who wonder why they have to drive to another town, Crested Butte, to get their mail. The Mt. Crested Butte Town Council addressed the issue at its December 7 meeting and during a work session with Mt. Crested Butte businesses preceding the meeting.

Town manager Joe Fitzpatrick provided some history on mountain mail service. In the "early 1980s through citizen, business, and town efforts, a contract post office opened in the Three Seasons Condominiums in a convenience grocery/liquor store. [It was] extremely well received and successful; Zip Code 81225 was born—Mt. Crested Butte now had identity in the world."

But in the late 1990s, Fitzpatrick explained, "The convenience store changed hands and the new owners did not like doing the post office work, and the postmaster pulled the contract due to too many service and customer problems and complaints. All Mt. Crested Butte post office boxes then were moved to the postal annex in Crested Butte next to the movie theater; we all drive to town for our mail."

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County approves Gems letter of support with a split vote

New letter urges a creative approach to Whetstone

[BY SETH MENSING]

Despite a meeting room overflowing with people representing seemingly every user group with a stake in the public lands on Whetstone Mountain, the Gunnison Board of County Commissioners kept the discussion about a proposed letter in support of the Hidden Gems Wilderness proposal among themselves before approving it Tuesday with a split vote.

The people in attendance filled the chairs, then the hallway and the stairwell and finally the floor of the commissioner's meeting room Tuesday, December 7 in a gathering that rivaled past Snodgrass discussions in number and diversity.

But commissioner Hap Channell made it clear that he hadn't seen any new information, despite being flooded with myriad comments from the public that would change his position. However his position was different from the blanket endorsement of the plan that staff had been directed to write the week before.

While that endorsement was on

the table, commissioners Paula Swenson and Channell each had crafted letters of their own to reflect differing opinions about whether the Whetstone Mountain portion of proposal should be included at all, or at what level.

Channell read his letter, which noted the importance of the areas being proposed for protection by Hidden Gems, for their biological diversity and location in an important watershed.

"We acknowledge that the Whetstone portion of the proposal is very controversial within our county and recognize that competing user groups have strong opinions about whether Whetstone should be included in the proposed package," Channell read, noting the envisioned Crested Butte to Gunnison bike trail. "We encourage the bill's sponsors to work with proponents to find alternate routes or management alternatives, if possible, without compromising the vital wilderness characteristic protections of the Whetstone parcel."

Channell also acknowledged the Hidden Gems Campaign for "the community vetting process" they engaged in.

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It's Titan Time



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Ten Minute Plays

[Overheard]

"Of course I do; I used to have a girlfriend."

-Local when asked if he owns Nordic skis



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Hidden Gems

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After reading portions of her letter in which she endorsed all of the proposal that affected lands in Gunnison County except the Whetstone portion, commissioner Paula Swenson said, “I actually don’t believe we as a community have properly vetted the Whetstone area... I don’t think it’s prudent for us to just go ahead and push it forward when we have so much controversy.”

The Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign is proposing legislation that would permanently protect about 35,000 acres of Gunnison County by growing five existing wilderness areas and creating one stand-alone Wilderness area on Whetstone Mountain.

The 16,000-plus-acre Whetstone part of the proposal was added to the proposal at the request of several local citizens’ groups that wanted to see the mountains’ wilderness characteristic protected from increased use. That generated some push-back from an apparently growing number of users who access the area for motorized backcountry travel as well as from a large contingent of mountain bikers.

“It boils down to Whetstone being the fulcrum of supporting the entire Hidden Gems proposal or not,” commissioner Channell said. “The issues mostly surround mountain biking versus non-mountain biking and concerns about a Gunnison to Crested Butte trail.”

The Gems Campaign has adjusted the proposed boundary of the Whetstone Mountain Wilderness to accommodate non-motorized uses to some extent already, notably on the Green Lake Trail and Baxter Gulch.

Since adopting Whetstone into

its proposal, the Gems has treated the area as one of its own and maintained a goal of preserv-

ing the integrity of Whetstone’s interior. That means no compromise on a corridor through the proposal area for a trail.

Since then, the battle over Whetstone Mountain, and ultimately the entire Hidden Gems proposal, has boiled down to a struggle between competing interests. And the frustration with the proposal extends beyond the motos and mountain bikers.

U.S. Forest Service district ranger John Murphy is the person Wilderness management responsibilities would fall to in the county, and he would rather see the Wilderness proposals go through the Forest Service process to be sure that the proposed areas can be given the protection they require.

He said, “Basically, I will tell you that the Forest Service’s position is that we have a process in place to designate Wilderness through a forest planning process and that includes public involvement. We are not strong advocates for the proposal. We would totally be deviating from the processes that are in place to designate Wilderness.”

Murphy also thinks, “There are a multitude of issues up there that would likely preclude a Wilderness designation. Mainly it is the mining claims that are up there.” But he said the forest service will learn to manage the forest for whatever special designations it gets.

The question of whether Whetstone Mountain is of Wilderness quality has been raised repeatedly in meetings and in correspondence with the county commissioners throughout the Hidden Gems discussion.

Last week, Perry Anderson of the Mt. Emmons Project drew a comparison between Whetstone Mountain and the neighboring West Elk and Maroon Bells Wildernesses, saying the Wilderness values of those established Wilderness areas, which were included in the original Wilderness Act of 1964, are clearly superior to those of Whetstone.

He mentioned several old two-track roads that travel through the proposed Wilderness. However the Wilderness Act of 1964 doesn’t differentiate between wildernesses of varying quality. Instead it offers definition for what Wilderness is and if it meets the criteria, the land is eligible to become Wilderness if Congress deems it to be.

And Murphy points out that “almost every Wilderness we have had motorized or mechanized trails at one time. That is not the issue. Patented claims are a far bigger issue.”

High Country Citizens’ Alliance executive director Dan Morse agrees that the existence of roads shouldn’t be a barrier to establishing Wilderness, but thinks the same thing could be said of mining claims.

“In general terms the Whetstone area is undisturbed with some exceptions,” Morse said. “Wilderness has been established in areas where there are existing claims on the ground and there are examples of that in almost every western state.”

However all roads to Wilderness lead through the United States Congress, which can designate appropriate lands as Wilderness wherever they choose and the Forest

Service essentially has to manage around the mandate.

While the Wilderness Act of 1964, which is the parent document for all Wilderness bills, requires strict regulation of mining activity within designated Wilderness areas, valid mining claims that exist before Wilderness areas are established are still honored.

Without the possibility of preventing established mining interests from developing claims in the proposed Wilderness areas, the group of outdoor recreationalist – mostly hikers and bikers – split over how much protection the area needed to maintain its backcountry character.

Crested Butte Mountain Bike Association president John Chandler said initial talks between his organization and Hidden Gems advocates fell through shortly after getting started, without much explanation.

Shortly after contact was made, and then lost, with Hidden Gems, Chandler says Colorado’s second U.S. congressional district representative Jared Polis began crafting his own Wilderness bill that included “Special management areas” in sensitive locations where motorized or mechanized uses had already been established.

The mountain biking community quickly became interested in finding a so-called “companion designation” to accommodate multiple uses of Whetstone.

“That’s why we feel the impetus is on us to take this thing over; we’re going to try to find some designation that will allow for a mountain bike trail and protect the qualities of Whetstone,” Chandler said. “I applaud Hidden Gems for making this issue front and center, but now actually we’re doing it as a community.”

And that was what Channell hoped to accomplish in his letter, which was ultimately the one chosen by two of the commissioners to send to congressman-elect Scott Tipton, whom Hidden Gems is soliciting for support.

Channell questioned the future of any Wilderness legislation going to Washington for congressional approval next year. “I hope we’re all pretty realistic that this thing might not ever get off the shelf in Washington, at least not in the near or foreseeable future,” he said. “But I’ve tried to put that out of my mind because that’s not our purpose here. Our purpose is, as a board, we’ve been asked to take a position on it and I believe we should do that.”

Channell and Starr haggled over some of the wording in the letter, but ultimately voted together to approve a letter of support for the proposal, with the expectation that whoever takes the legislation to congress work to include every possible alternative to accommodate all non-motorized users in the area.

“I think there is still the potential at my level of understanding, that a management alternative might be appropriate,” Channell said. Starr agreed to include the language rather than not send a letter at all.

“I just wanted to say again that I can’t vote for this letter because I think there is too much divisiveness in the community over the inclusion of Whetstone,” Swenson said.

The commissioners voted 2-1 to send the letter to Tipton and the rest of the local congressional delegation.

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