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Whetstone dominates 'Gems' debate

Commissioners urged to support local wilderness proposal

Will Shoemaker
 Times Staff Writer

No one disagreed that the so-called Whetstone Mountain Roadless Area is a pristine swath of public land in the Gunnison Basin.

It was whether the vast majority of the parcel is worth designating as wilderness that was the topic of debate Tuesday in front of the Gunnison County Commissioners.

The Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign is attempting to drum up support for their proposal — which includes the Whetstone area and six other parcels partly, or entirely, in Gunnison County — from the commissioners.

With about 50 in attendance, the county's highest elected body heard arguments Tuesday from all sides of the issue. That included testimony from mountain bikers, hikers, conservationists, snowmobilers and other public lands users.

A few more spoke in favor of the Hidden Gems proposal than



Gunnison County Hidden Gems organizer Laura Yale addresses the Gunnison County Commissioners Tuesday. Hidden Gems proponents are asking the commissioners for their support.

Photo by Will Shoemaker

against it. Yet, many of those in opposition agreed that there may be value in protecting certain swaths — like, possibly, the Whetstone area — but suggested that wilderness designation isn't the best means.

"There are companion designations that we could be led

to, where you'd get more people on board and it might succeed," said Crested Butte resident John Elm, urging the commissioners to lead the way toward compromise. "It looks like right now that it has a low probability."

The approximately 16,000-acre Whetstone proposal

encompasses Whetstone and Axtell mountains and Carbon Peak. Earlier this week, however, Hidden Gems leaders announced that they have removed 1,160 acres from the Whetstone proposal in order to

▶▶ Wilderness on page A12

Sales hold, prices don't

2009 was the year for local 'market correction' in real estate

Chris Dickey
 Times Editor

Working harder to make less.

That is an economic phenomenon hitting workers in many industries, all across the country during this recession. And if you gauge it solely by the data, it appears to have rung true for Gunnison County real estate professionals in 2009.

They sold nearly as many homes as they did in 2008

▶▶ Real estate on page A6

DOW center gets first stamp of approval

State Wildlife Commission to hear plans next

Will Shoemaker
 Times Staff Writer

A proposal to build a regional Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) headquarters and environmental "outreach center" in Gunnison has cleared its first hurdle of approval.

DOW State Director Tom Remington announced this week that he and his staff like what they've seen of conceptual plans for the center thus far. The agency is next taking the pitch to the state's Wildlife Commission, the appointed board which governs the DOW, in March.

Tom Spezze, southwest regional manager for the DOW, presented the concept Jan. 12

to Remington and his staff.

Remington had said previously that he was looking for "what could be a world class outdoor education complex" to give the project his stamp of approval.

Proponents of the Gunnison Rising annexation offered to donate land to the DOW for such a facility leading up to the annexation's approval late last year.

Since then, DOW leaders have begun formulating plans for their project. Spezze is leading the charge.

"It's beyond education," Remington explained. "This is an opportunity to get kids and families outdoors."

He cited the 450-acre "Tomichi Creek State Wildlife Area" — a parcel adjacent to the proposed outreach center that the DOW recently acquired — as offering the sort of attraction that's central to the concept.

▶▶ DOW on page A6

Trying to salvage a season

Specials aimed at boosting CBMR visitor numbers

Will Shoemaker
 Times Staff Writer

Nearly half of the people who vacationed at Crested Butte Mountain Resort this past December booked reservations during the month of their visit.

That's a case in point of the challenges the resort is dealing with this season. Savings-savvy visitors are booking trips last-minute or hunting for the best deals.

Even with a strong effort by both CBMR and the Gunnison Valley Rural Transportation Authority (RTA) to lure those price conscious customers, visitation so far this winter isn't very strong, at best.

Thus far, "room nights" through Crested Butte Vacations,



CBMR employee Ness Stepleton scans tickets in the Red Lady Express lift line over Martin Luther King, Jr., Day weekend. Resort leaders say that skier visits over the holiday weekend fell below both last year's figures and this year's projection.

Photo by Will Shoemaker

CBMR's reservations arm, are down 15 percent from last year.

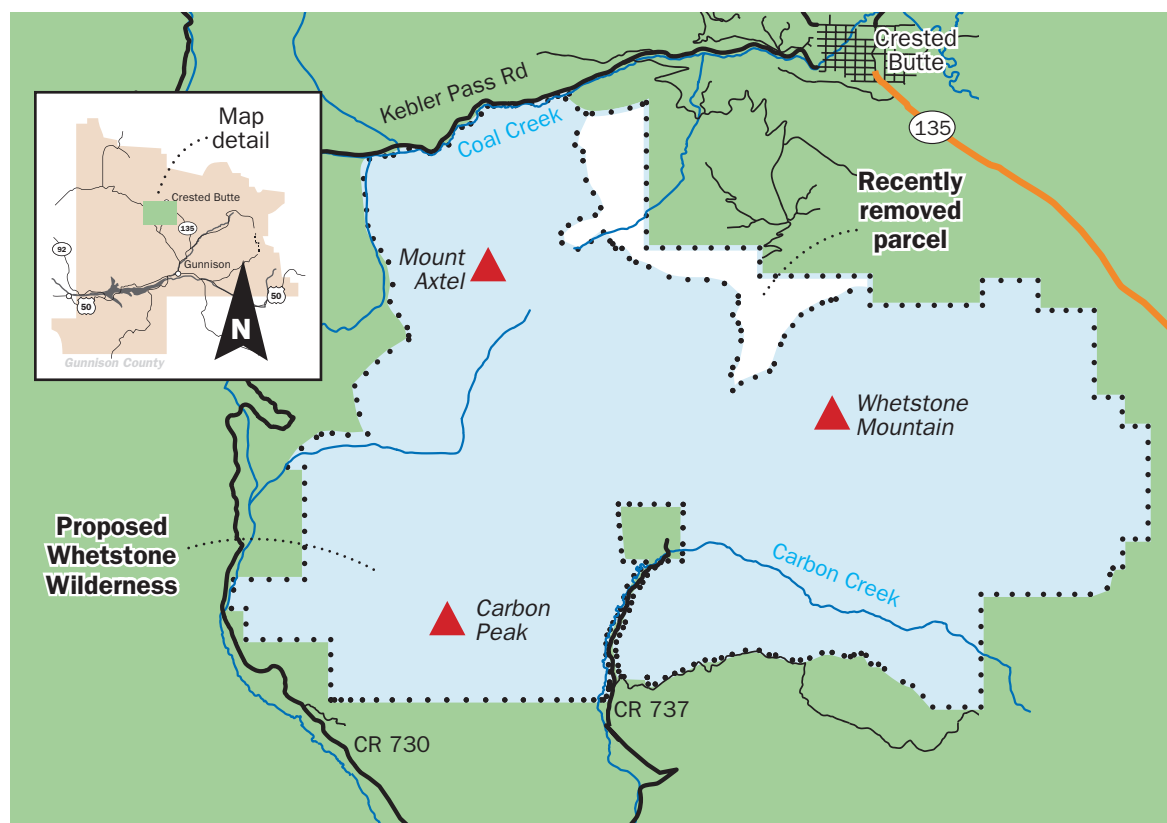
Skier visits over the recent Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday weekend fell below both last year's figures and this year's projection.

As of mid-January, nearly 24 percent fewer total airline seats were sold for the month on

flights into the local airport compared to the same time last year. Total seats sold for the remainder of the winter season are also down from this time last year.

Whether because of snow, the economy or a combination of both, the local tourism economy

▶▶ CBMR on page A7



Hidden Gems proponents recently modified the boundaries of the proposed Whetstone wilderness area — part of their larger proposal. Seen here is the redrawn boundary line and parcel recently removed from the proposal. *Map/Gunnison Country Times*

Wilderness

► from page A1

preserve bicycle access to the popular Green Lake Trail.

In total, Hidden Gems has identified 415,000 acres for wilderness protection, primarily in Eagle, Pitkin, Summit and Gunnison counties.

The group's leaders hope to secure a sponsor for the proposed legislation from among Colorado's Congressional representatives later this spring.

County Commissioner Jim Starr indicated, albeit somewhat jokingly, that the county prior to the meeting Tuesday had received an "avalanche" of written comments from locals.

Recently, the Crested Butte Mountain Bike Association opposed Hidden Gems in a letter to the County Commissioners, suggesting instead that "companion designations" — which could allow for certain kinds of recreation, including mountain biking, that are barred from wilderness areas — may be a solution.

Other Hidden Gems opponents Tuesday cited the heavy mechanized and motorized use the Whetstone area currently receives as reason why it shouldn't be designated wilderness.

Still, members of the Elk Mountains Hikers Club (EMHC), representatives from

High Country Citizens' Alliance, and even some who identified themselves as mountain bikers and snowmobilers voiced support for Hidden Gems — and the Whetstone area specifically.

"The comments you've heard today that favor trail access over the protection of wilderness is a perfect indication of the pressure of increased use on public lands," said EMHC representative Maureen Hall.

Lifelong local rancher Ken Spann — whose family owns property directly adjacent to the Whetstone area — questioned whether boundaries could feasibly be enforced, should the parcel become designated wilderness.

"I've got a really good map with me that was drawn yesterday with some of the most state-of-the-art computer technology that's available in Western Colorado," said Spann, adding that he's yet to decide whether to support the proposal. "Unless you have a really good GPS system and a really good set of maps, some of those boundaries are really hard to find on the ground — and I'm intimately familiar with the ground."

"On the front side (of Whetstone Mountain), are we going to be the enforcement people?" he questioned.

Others criticized the process leading up to the proposal.

"At the last minute, (Hidden

Gems) identified the Whetstone area as proposed wilderness without any community discussion," said Perry Anderson, community liaison for the Mt. Emmons Moly Co., which has mill site claims in the area.

Local Hidden Gems organizer Laura Yale explained that she's worked with stakeholders, making boundary adjustments where necessary to accommodate some users that would be impacted.

"We realize that we can't satisfy everyone that uses these pieces of land," she said, "but we've done our best to constructively work with people and find on-the-ground solutions."

The Crested Butte Town Council approved a letter of support for Hidden Gems' Gunnison County parcels, including Whetstone, late last year.

Other Western Slope county leaders, however, have been critical of the divisiveness the proposal has created. The Mesa County Commissioners have adopted a resolution opposing Hidden Gems.

The Gunnison County Commissioners are expected to revisit the request for support in coming weeks.

(Will Shoemaker can be contacted at 970.641.1414 or will@gunnisontimes.com)



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