

LOCAL & REGION

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Land exchange finishes decade of work

Newly-signed deal protects land in Avon, Lake Creek, other locations

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EAGLE COUNTY — There's a difference between "public land" and "protected land." The recently completed Eagle Valley Land Exchange will protect hundreds of acres of public land.

The complex exchange of land and cash — which was finalized Nov. 6 and is expected to close in January — includes 478 acres between Avon and Singletree. That land belongs to the U.S. Forest Service and is used by hikers, cyclists and people who just want a great view of Avon's Fourth of July fireworks.

Since the property is surrounded by private land, the feds have for years sought to dispose of the parcel. In this case, "disposal" means "sell" to just about any buyer with the cash or property of the same value to trade. Several years ago, Vail Resorts tried to work out a deal that would have put employee housing on the site. Other proposals that would have developed the property have come and gone over the years.

That's why local governments and open space advocates have for years sought to work out a deal to keep the property open and undeveloped.

Kara Heide, the director of the Eagle Valley Land Trust, remembers many of those efforts, which stretch back more than a decade. None came to pass for a variety of reasons, not least of which were the federal government's requirements that any land exchange work out to the penny on appraised values, and a relatively short time that those appraisals are valid. When the appraisal deadlines expire, the parties need to start over.

In fact, this deal was bumping up against a deadline this month.

This version of the land exchange has been in the works since 2008. Over the years, the number of parties grew, as did the complexity. Eventually, the exchange involved federal, state and local

agencies, as well as cash to make all the values work out. Eagle County put up \$5.3 million, the town of Avon added another \$1 million and the Eagle River Water and Sanitation District added \$340,000 to the pot.

Eagle County Open Space Coordinator Toby Sprunk said most of that money will go to the Colorado State Land Board, which manages thousands of acres of land for the benefit of the state's public schools. The money from this exchange will go into the land board's trust fund, interest from which goes to schools. That means the cash used for this exchange will eventually be spread across the state.

Who gets what?

- A 478-acre parcel will be transferred from the U.S. Forest Service to the town of Avon.
- A 640-acre Colorado State Land Board parcel north of Berry Creek will go to the Forest Service.
- A 160-acre parcel near Cordillera will become Eagle County open space.
- A 184-acre parcel near the Eagle's Nest Wilderness will be transferred from a private owner to the Forest Service.
- Most of the roughly \$6.5 million cash in the deal will go to the land board, to be put into that board's school-funding trust fund.

*This is only a partial list.

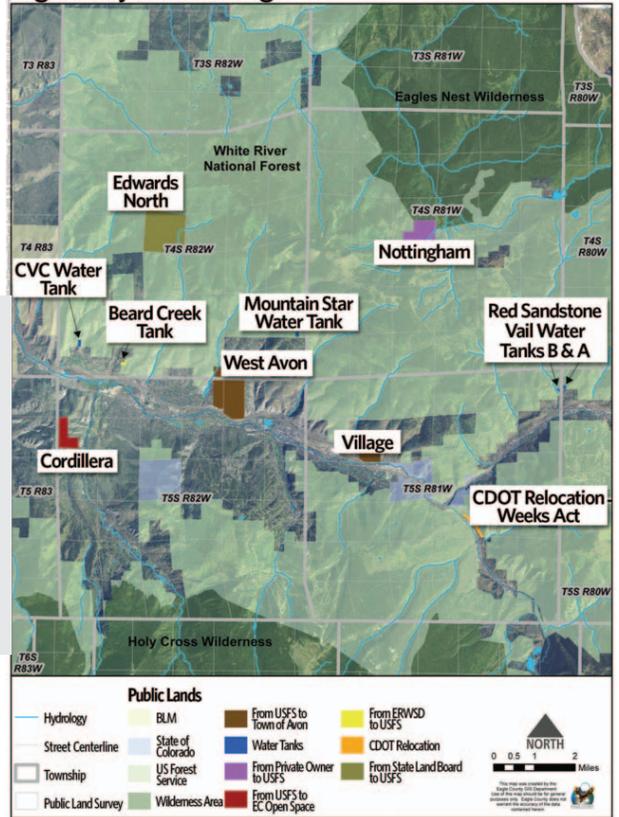
But, Sprunk said, local taxpayers ended up with a great deal.

"We protected 1,549 acres for less than \$3,500 per acre," Sprunk said. "If we were to buy this land, the west Avon parcel alone would have cost \$5.2 million."

The west Avon parcel, along with a smaller Forest Service parcel surrounded by the Village at Avon property on the east end of town, will be owned by the town. But the land trust will hold and enforce a "conservation easement" on the land. Those easements are, in essence, contracts that prevent any future development. The land trust holds those easements so a town or county government can't try to sell or develop the property in the future.

As far as Heide is concerned, this and other land exchanges are victories for future

Eagle Valley Land Exchange



generations.

Like many valley residents, Heide spends time shopping or passing through Summit County. There, it's hard to tell whether you're in Silverthorne, Dillon or Frisco. That, she said, is an important lesson for Eagle County.

And, Heide said, this deal is a testament to this generation's dedication to its children.

"There will be long-term benefits from this long after we're gone," she said.