



THE SIGNATURE

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Local developer to take control of ski area

Ski area to reopen next summer as year-round resort

by Renee Rinehart

(La Veta, Colo.) Get ready to ride a mountain coaster or soar on a zip line through the forest, as the Cuchara Mountain Resort will be opening as a year round recreation resort beginning in the summer of 2011, according to Bruce Cantrell of Cuchara Valley Recreational Foundation.

Quietly working on the project for three years, Cantrell, a local resident and businessman, agreed to purchase the resort from Mike Balloun last Saturday, for an undisclosed amount. Balloun received ownership of the ski area a few weeks ago in an agreement with former owner John Bryant. The final change of ownership is planned for November.

"It's a long-term project for the community," Cantrell told *The Signature*. The plan calls for \$20 million in improvements to the infrastructure.

Next summer, the area will boast a mountain coaster, the next generation of Alpine Slides, with two-person sleds.

The lower lift will be utilized to carry people up the mountain for the coaster ride down, or ride the chair lift up and hang on to a zip line for a descent down the mountain.

Activities will also include wagon rides, fishing, rock climbing walls and mountain biking.

An outdoor venue is also planned to host entertainment and educational events.

In the winter months, the resort will add activities including a tubing hill and a ski hill for beginners. A "magic carpet" people mover will be installed to easily reach activities at the base of the resort and to carry people up the hill for tubing and skiing.

"Discounts for local county residents is key to the success of the resort," Cantrell said. Programs will be developed to encourage youth participation in activities at the resort.

The plan calls for using the existing lower hill, lifts and ski runs in the first phase of the redevelopment of the old ski area. The initial costs of \$1.5 million will cover the feasibility study, taxes, design and engineering needed to update the existing facilities, ski lifts and restaurant.

The first phase also calls for \$10 million to build the convention center, a new chair lift, magic carpet, mountain coaster, snow board half-pipe, tubing hill.

Included in the initial plans is construction of a 10-acre lake



Bruce Cantrell



(Signature file photo)

The base of the ski hills at Cuchara Mountain Resort show old lift #4 on the left, and lift #3 on the right which carried skiers to the top of the mountain. Bruce Cantrell purchased the shuttered ski area to develop for year-round use.

next to the base building in conjunction with Cucharas Sanitation & Water District. According to Cantrell, the lake will be used for snowmaking and can serve augmentation needs for the Cucharas river.

The plan is still contingent upon approval from the National Forest Service to expand operations to the upper hill, but Cantrell said the application is in process.

The business plan estimates 38 employees in the first year, and up to 52 by the sixth year. The plan is based on conservative estimates of winter ski visits and summer patrons.

The first year is anticipated to have 20,000 summer visitors

and 13,250 in the winter. With moderate growth, the plans counts 65,000 total for the winter and summer months in the sixth year. The economic impact from the recreation area is estimated to net 600 jobs in the valley.

"It will create jobs and the county will get something vital again," Cantrell added.

"It's phenomenal!" Cuchara business owner Cal Sandbeck told *The Signature*. "It will give people a reason to come here and stay. We used to have five restaurants in the area, and we can do it again."

Cantrell went before the Huerfano County Commissioners on Wednesday to pres-

Mountain coaster, skiing and year round tubing coming



(photo by Renee Rinehart)

ent the plan to form the Cuchara Valley Recreation Metropolitan District. Once the district is approved, bonds will be issued to raise \$10 to \$14 million in capital to pay for infrastructure improvements.

County Commissioner Chairman Art Bobian said, "A lot of work has been put into this business plan. It makes a lot more sense to be year-round."

"We're in it for the long-term, we're doing it right," Cantrell told the commissioners on Wednesday.

San Isabel Electric Association has committed to sponsor a grant for \$1 million to develop the ski area as a green facility, relying on renewable energy to be self-sufficient, Cantrell said.

The ski area and base will be owned and operated by the district, and a separate company. The Case Company of Colorado Springs, Colo., will take over ownership of the developable real estate at the ski area. Plans call for a hotel resort, condos and homes near the ski area.

In addition to bond funding from the district, the plan calls for grants from the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade. Huerfano County will be asked to pledge \$1 million to the project, contributing \$100,000 per year for ten years.

"Dwight Harrison was a key player in getting the right people together to make this happen," Cantrell said.

Cantrell credits the success to foundation board members and local business leaders Bob Baker, Cal and Karen Sandbeck and Marshall Moore, who worked with him in the last few years to develop the business plan. The Cuchara Valley Recreation Foundation grew from the Cuchara Valley Recreation Co-op, which was started in 2007 by a group of local residents.

"Our love for this valley justifies our continued stewardship and our commitment is to create a recreational/conference complex that is sensitive to our environment and will be a sparkling gem for our community, county and state for generations to come," the group states in the business plan.

Bob Baker, President of the La Veta-Cuchara Chamber of Commerce said, "The La Veta-Cuchara Chamber has worked with many groups over the last few years in trying to revive the ski area. These continued efforts along with many other individuals have finally put us on the path to reopen."

According to Baker, the

chamber board reviewed the initial plan in February and wholly endorsed it. "There are still some hurdles to cross but I am optimistic that they will be worked through. I see this entity creating an economic engine that will stimulate growth and employment opportunities for our area. I'm looking forward to working with the CVMD and other area agencies to make this a reality," Baker added.

The project also has the support of the Huerfano County Tourism Board, and the La Veta Fire Protection Dist.

"If Colorado voters pass "no tax" initiatives 60, 61 and 101 this fall it will be the death knell to this project," Commissioner Scott King said.

Cantrell has hired seasoned professional, Jim Gill, to serve as general manager of the resort. Gill spent 40 years in the ski resort industry, and managed ski resorts including Bitterroot Resort in Montana and Jackson Hole Mountain Resort. He spent 20 years at Breckenridge Ski Resort. His resume includes real estate, economic development and management credentials.

"John Galusha has encouraged us all the way," Cantrell said.

"We are looking forward to someone that believes in the area, and Bruce and Joan Cantrell and the Case family are taking a big risk—but it was going to take someone with vision," Sandbeck said.



(photo by Renee Rinehart)

The buildings at the base of the ski area will be refurbished to include a restaurant and shops.

THE BUSINESS PLAN

CUCHARA MOUNTAIN RESORT

- Cuchara Mountain Resort will offer year-round recreation with a \$20 million investment in improvements and infrastructure.

- The 47-acre resort will be operated by a volunteer board of the non-profit Cuchara Valley Recreational Foundation.

- A full-time General Manager, Jim Gill, will run the day-to-day operations of the resort.

- The Cuchara Valley Recreational Metropolitan District will issue \$10-\$14 million in bonds to raise capital for infrastructure improvements.

- A November ballot question will be needed to form the Cuchara Valley Recreational Metropolitan District.

- Cuchara Valley Metropolitan District will pay the county back taxes of \$963,885.32.

- In addition to bond funding, the plan calls for grants from the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade.

- Huerfano County will be asked to pledge \$1 million to the project, contributing \$100,000 per year for ten years. Funds will go toward the construction of a convention facility.

- San Isabel Electric Association has committed to sponsor a grant for \$1 million to develop the ski area as a green facility, relying on renewable energy to be self-sufficient.

- A developer, The Case Company of Colorado Springs, purchased the developable acres of land for future development.