

# COLORADO

## Ski Cooper plans entangled

### Environmental concerns delay improvements

By Steve Lipsher  
Denver Post Mountain Bureau

LEADVILLE — Although considered a crucial part of the economic renaissance of Lake County, tiny Ski Cooper faces an uphill battle these days, as upgrade proposals have led to environmental concerns and agency delays.

And even if plans are approved for a 40-acre terrain expansion and some 500 trophy homes, the resort's pockets aren't nearly as deep as the powder on Tennessee Pass, meaning the projects could be long years away as the region continues to struggle financially.

"If we broke ground tomorrow, I'm not sure if it would be in time to meet our needs," Lake County Commissioner Jim Morrison said.

Pending before the U.S. Forest Service is a ski-area master plan that calls for three new lifts, a ski school building and four additional runs on the county-owned resort's "back side," a proposal that isn't particularly controversial itself.

But Lake County officials are drawing the ire of environmentalists by also pushing for a land exchange — swapping more than 800 acres of ranch land in the Arkansas Valley south of town for a Forest Service parcel at the base of the ski area — to build luxury homes and shops.

"We have serious concerns about the land exchange," said Jeff Berman of Boulder-based Colorado Wild. "Development on top of Tennessee Pass is not a good idea. . . . A lot of people don't

want to see public lands abused for real-estate development."

In a county where assessed valuation plunged from \$250 million to a low of \$45 million after Climax mine closed and has since crept upwards only very slowly, the development is seen as a way of increasing the tax base — and the skier numbers.

But with Colorado Wild calling for an expensive and time-consuming environmental-impact statement on the land swap and the Forest Service undergoing substantial turnover locally, the proposals have languished for years.

"We can't afford that time," Morrison said. "We need to do something, and we need to do it fast."

The dispute isn't about the solvency of the ski area, which operates in the black. It's about the county itself, which already has invested \$1.5 million in the 1,100-acre Hollenback Ranch as land-swap trade bait and operates under a deficit budget.

"We're not looking at this Ski Cooper land swap to be the save-all of the entire community," Morrison said. "We've got some other things. But we need to put some kind of tax base in the ground."

At one point, the former Leadville district ranger for the Forest Service suggested the land swap could have been completed by the end of last year. Now — facing a slow bureaucracy and the potential for legal challenges — it could be seven or eight years out.

"We don't even know if it's going to happen at all," Morrison said, noting

that federal law requires land swaps to be of equal value, which may ultimately prove to be prohibitive to the county.

The financial situation has been noticed by Colorado Wild members, who say they don't intend to impede Lake County's badly needed economic development but don't want development on a "rare and quality forested corridor across the Continental Divide."

Berman said the group doesn't oppose the ski-area expansion, an atypical sign of concession in the aftermath of Vail's massive and controversial Category III expansion just 20 miles away.

"Obviously this is no Vail," he said. "When you're talking Ski Cooper and Lake County, it's a small scale."

The resort attracts about 70,000 skiers annually and, on a typical weekday, sees fewer than 300 on the slopes — numbers officials would like to bolster with the expansion and the housing development.

"We would like to do some improvements so that we could feel like we're in the competition with the other smaller areas," resort spokeswoman Anne Dougherty said.

County officials argue that the two proposals are separate and should be considered separately by the Forest Service — a notion that Colorado Wild disputes.

"These are connected actions," Berman said, calling for an exhaustive environmental study of both proposals together rather than a cursory environmental analysis. "Only with the ski-area expansion and upgrade would

### Uphill battle

Leadville and Lake County officials are pushing for expansion of Ski Cooper and housing development nearby, but environmental groups are opposed. The development hinges on a land swap involving land near the ski area and ranch land south of town.



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Ski Cooper remain viable, . . . and without Ski Cooper there, the land exchange doesn't make any sense at all."

Pointing to a potential \$1 million price tag on a full-blown environmental-impact statement that the county can't afford, Morrison said the group was "resorting to blackmail."

"Here's a group that's not even up here and doesn't understand what we're up against," he said. "This will, in fact, deter our time frame by a considerable amount. We don't know if we'll ever get it done."