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SERVICES

Locals want Old Spanish Trail preserved

By Sharon Sullivan
[Grand Junction CO Colorado](#)
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At the beginning of the trailhead, the land is brown and barren.

But in another three weeks, there'll be a huge number of wildflowers in bloom on the Old Spanish Trail on Orchard Mesa, said Lynn Ensley, who lives about three blocks away from the trailhead.

The trail is a respite for him — a place he retreats to three times a week to get away from work and the city.

“Sometimes I make a circle using the Old Spanish Trail and the Gunnison Bluffs Trail” to the south, Ensley said. From the bluffs there’s a view of the Gunnison River, where deer graze, wild turkeys roam and bald eagles nest.

Earl Heusser stands at the trailhead of the North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail on Orchard Mesa. He hikes the trail on a regular basis.

Sharon Sullivan | Free Press



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There are also several families of foxes, and you can hear coyotes in the evenings, Ensley said.

Those are some of the reasons he'd like to see the trails and the area around them preserved as open space.

"This is an ideal place for a Great Outdoors Colorado grant to come in," Ensley said. "Especially in Mesa County where we have such rapid growth."

The trail, which ends up in Whitewater, is popular with hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians.

Mark Strodman of Windsor has purchased nearly 400 acres in the area over the past couple of years. If Grand Junction approves annexation of 17 of those acres, Strodman's company, The Shores LLC, would like to build a subdivision there.

Strodman was indicted this week on 23 felony counts relating to his developments in Weld County.

Dave Bailey, curator of history at the Museum of Western Colorado, has other reasons why he'd like to see the land remain largely undeveloped.

"There's a lot of significant history we're just finding," Bailey said. "If they're going to build on top of the trail or close to it, it gives access to historic sites, and then you'll lose that information. It's happened in lots of places where they've built subdivisions."

The trail on Orchard Mesa is part of the northern branch of the Old Spanish Trail, an ancient trade route originally used by American Indians and, later, Spanish explorers and mountain men.

Traders traversed the 1,200-mile trail from Santa Fe to Los Angeles, where they exchanged woolen goods for horses and mules. The trail starts in Santa Fe and heads north to Colorado, then west to Utah, Arizona and Nevada, before arriving in California.

"Indians, everybody used it. It was like a highway, an early highway," Bailey said.

Journals indicate there are a lot of artifacts buried along the route.

"So there's a lot of history here," Bailey said.

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A new exhibit by the Museum of the West will be unveiled next year — findings that will reveal what drew people to this area, Bailey said.

“We do know they were looking for this lost colony. They believed if they followed the Colorado River to the end it would lead to the seven cities (of gold),” Bailey said.

A National Old Spanish Trail Association was established in Del Norte in 1994 for the purpose of studying, preserving and protecting the historical integrity of the trail. Members range from across the country and as far away as England.

In 2003, President George W. Bush designated the Old Spanish Trail as a National Historic Trail. The National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management administer the trail.

Grand Junction resident Jack Nelson has been interested in the trail since 1949.

Nelson, 86, said he’s walked most of it, from north of San Bernardino, Calif., to close to the Utah border.

He published a book, “The Forgotten Pathfinders,” on the trail’s history about four years ago — a “tale of the Old Spanish Trail, its trappers, horse thieves,” Nelson said.

Nelson helped found a local chapter of the OSTA-North Branch in 1994. The group and the Colorado Department of Transportation placed interpretive signs on Highway 50. The local chapter of the OSTA installed the stone marker on Unawep Avenue and 28 Road, near where the trail crosses the Colorado River.

Another marker at Eagle Rim Park is dedicated to pioneer women who traveled the trail. There’s also an interpretive panel off Highway 50 about a third of the way to Delta with information about the Old Spanish Trail.

Most of the trail goes through public lands, but a portion of it cuts across private property, like Strodsmans’. The Front Range developer has filed an application to annex his property so he can build his subdivision.

Strodtman could not be reached for comment.

Nelson cares about the trail but said, “you can’t stand in the way of progress, as long as you recognize we got a trail in there.

“People can put on the wall of their bedrooms, ‘The Old Spanish Trail goes through here,’” Nelson said.

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