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Fairgrounds market value: Sale would break promise, vets say

By GARY HARMON
The Daily Sentinel

Saturday, April 26, 2008

There's a long history of promise to Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park, and an equally long history of promises, some broken, some forgotten, some fulfilled but now grown old.

And some just left behind.

One that meets all those descriptions is the memorial to veterans who left their homes in 32 counties of western Colorado and eastern Utah to go to wars in Europe, Asia and elsewhere.

The memorial stands at the farthest reaches of the Mesa County Fairgrounds, hidden behind a grandstand and, most of the time, a chain-link fence.

At the base of the memorial, which was fashioned of iron to represent an eternal flame, sits a plaque dedicated in 1972 that declares that the land around it was purchased by Mesa County in 1967 to guarantee it would be of perpetual service to the intermountain region.

Jack Lucas and John Frezieres say the plaque tells the tale: that the county bought what is now the fairgrounds to use as a memorial to veterans and as an agricultural and cultural center.

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County officials don't dispute the obligation to do those things, but they're looking at what seems a promising way to do them better somewhere else.

Specifically, the county is intrigued by the idea of moving the Mesa County Fairgrounds to the old Jarvis property along the Colorado River, where developer Reed Mitchell is hoping to build the 5,000-seat Riverside Arena, using loans guaranteed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

That part about the agriculture loan guarantee rankles a bit, Frezieres said, given that the idea behind Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park was an agricultural, educational, cultural and memorial center.

It still could be all that and more, he said.

Had things gone as originally promised, "right over there would be a nice coliseum," Frezieres said, pointing from the memorial to the wind-buffed weed field in the middle of the 93 acres that are now the Mesa County Fairgrounds.

Like so much of Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park, the flame is a promise still waiting to be fulfilled.

U.S. Highway 50 now runs more than a quarter-mile to the north, and the memorial is oriented in the opposite direction, toward B Road. The fairgrounds grandstand, Jack Wadlow Memorial Stadium, blocks any view of the veterans memorial from the highway.

Drivers passing the memorial on B Road have no way to find out what it is because there is no access from B Road into the fairgrounds.

That the memorial isn't doing the job it was intended to do is a point that Frezieres concedes.

That it ought to be moved is a point he won't.

"We need to get some signs around it" to explain to passers-by what the memorial is, he told Lucas last week during a visit to the park.

Veterans sell park

Frezieres, Lucas and Keith Mumby are the last of the original members of the Intermountain Veterans Memorial Association, which sold the park to the county in 1967.

Frezieres, a Korean War veteran, and Lucas, a World War II vet, contend the promise was made then, when the association agreed to the county's offer of \$85,000 for the park. The veterans rejected a Californian's offer of \$250,000, they said, because the county agreed to fulfill the promise of using the land as a center for remembering veterans, promoting agriculture and offering cultural experiences, not just for Grand Junction but for a region stretching from the Continental Divide to the Wasatch Front in Utah.

The Californian wanted to build condos, Frezieres said.

Mumby said the details are hazy but "I'm 100 percent in accord with the philosophy that (the park) should not be sold."

If there's anything perpetual about the park, it's that it's long on promise, short on delivery.

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Horse racing didn't last. A dogged effort to call the track Uranium Downs and run greyhounds failed.

Hopes that the fairgrounds would spark development such as new hotels and restaurants on Orchard Mesa never bore fruit.

"Throughout its 50-year life, the facility has been plagued by two problems," says a 2003 analysis of the fairgrounds written for the Mesa County Commission. "One, it has tried to perform too many diverse functions with no overall strategic directive. Two, it has never had a long-term and consistent commitment of funds and a management structure geared to use of those funds to reach a defined strategic objective."

The county should be seeking Great Outdoors Colorado grants every year for the park, said Frezieres, who said he wants the county to go back to referring it as Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park, not the Mesa County Fairgrounds.

However stunted the park might be these days, it's possible that the east end of the property, which contains the stadium, what remains of the track, the covered pavilion and arena, the community building and stalls, could be a cash cow for a new fairgrounds on land adjoining a new civic arena.

Tom Fisher, regional services director for the county, is charged with investigating whether there's new promise for the agricultural and patriotic purposes that Intermountain Veterans Park was to fulfill.

The possibility of building new facilities in the same area as the proposed Riverside Arena, Fisher said, promises a synergy, the ability to accomplish more with those facilities together than could be done with far-flung attractions.

A new outdoor arena and dirt-floor indoor arenas for equestrian and other agricultural events, and new display buildings, barns and stalls and other facilities could be a new home to the Mesa County Fair.

The way to pay for them would be to sell off the old fairgrounds, leaving intact the west end of the park on Orchard Mesa for the Little League diamonds, open space and Tri-River Extension Service.

There's no doubt that new facilities are needed, fairgrounds users and other officials say.

Mesa County, for instance, has no public indoor, dirt-floor arena for equestrian events, which puts it at a competitive disadvantage with Rifle and Delta, both of which sport indoor arenas.

"We tried and tried," said Caesar Dotta of Grand Junction, a longtime member of the Mesa County Fair Board who also puts on equestrian events. "We were going to get an indoor thing going. It just never materialized."

An indoor horse arena would be an economic boon on more than one level, he said.

Indoor horse arena

Participants need hotel rooms, restaurant meals and all the trappings of travel, he said.

If the county builds "a nice facility, people buy homes for just that reason and say nothing about spending \$200,000 for a barn" for their animals, he said.

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The fair facilities badly need updating and expansion, Dotta said, if for no other reason than to make sure that various displays don't suffer for their proximity to one another.

"It's pretty sad when you work six months on a quilt and it smells like horse manure" after a few days of display at the fair, he said.

Wadlow Memorial Stadium has worked well for a long time, said Darren Cook of Extreme Promotions, which put on this weekend's motorcycle Supercross event at the fairgrounds.

But the times are changing.

Wadlow Arena seats 3,000 people and "we're needing a facility with three to four times the number of seats," Cook said. "If we had 10,000 seats, I think the events would fill them."

The Riverside Arena could draw events such as his away from the fairgrounds, Cook said.

"We've had price increases and we can't pull more spectators," Cook said. "We're still limited to 3,000 people even though expenses have gone up."

While they're performing a feasibility study, county officials are running a title search to see whether they're legally limited in what they can do with the park, Fisher said. If there's a contractual obligation, the county will honor it, Commissioner Steve Acquafresca said.

But if the county does sell the east end of the park on Orchard Mesa, the memorial flame will still have a home, as will the plaques that document the history of the place, said Fisher.

"We'll make sure they get placed," he said.

Fisher, after all, spent a year in Iraq with the National Guard and knows about the promise that awaits and the one that was made.

Intermountain Veterans Memorial Park had a specific purpose, one Fisher said, one "I'm not going to forget."

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E-mail Gary Harmon at gharmon@gjds.com.

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By ex OM-er

Apr 27, 2008 11:13 AM | [Link to this](#)

If the 35 million Dept of Ag loan were to be invested in the Intermountain Veteran's Memorial property I imagen you could certainly have a first class facility that people could readily access hotel accomodations via the Riverside Parkway in only moments- certainly the land and infrastructure costs could be put into re-developing the site layout where it currently is!

Oh but wait that's not what the GJ council members or business community wants- heck they've thrown away the Las Colonias plan that was to link OM and lower downtown with a visionary river front park and connecting trail system...and they are considering allowing an seedy developer trash the Spanish Trail and fragile desert ecosystems with a crappy development.... oh yeah when the Highway 50 corridor was being addressed we didn't need to do anything between 29 Road and the 5th Street bridge to enhance OM business sector...just annex and tax it but don't really invest in it only the working people live there. The Unahweep Road improvements were just supposed to be the beginning not the only part of revitalizing OM as a community. It was supposed to link the Veterans Memorial Park with the Las Colonias Park and river trails and with downtown,,, but who remembers the what the OM residents wanted? how about the lower South downtown residents? ...attend public forums, provide your input to neighborhood development meetings, take your time to participate and forge a vision for your neighborhood and just watch how the city will dismiss earlier plans, change plans, and allow the most recent developer of the week to build whatever they want on OM :(clearly those on the council should be able to see why OM residents mistrust City Gov't.

By Coloradolady

Apr 27, 2008 7:39 AM | [Link to this](#)

I agree with David Crosby to a point. I remember when it was Uranium Downs and the horse races! Ohhh weren't those the good old days!! As for Frezieres, Lucas and Keith Mumby, you guys better hold on to your hats. The city loves to remove, squander, tear up, knock down, deem condemed or whatever when they want to make some money at us 'older peoples' expense. Let's get a new board or members who have been here and remember how it was to help these 3 guys. We are behind you. DON'T LET THE CITY JUST KEEP TAKING OUR HISTORY AND PADDING THEIR POCKETS!! David, are you with me here? As for your comment, David, 'save your crap about fighting for my freedom', my husband was VietNam and he is right by your side on that!! I'd love for everyone to really think about this. People usually throw in that comment when they don't know what else to say. I do like the memorials tho. They kinda keep the war in perspective for those up and coming young sprouts that play video games rather than read a history book.

By David Crosby

Apr 27, 2008 4:32 AM | [Link to this](#)

Change the name back to Uranium Downs and bring back horse races. And parimutual or off site waging. We've enough war memorials to last a few years. After another 10 or 20 years in Iraq and 9 dollar a gallon gasoline well need some place to drink and gamble anyway. We won't be driving anywhere. These people like their wars too much. And save your crap about fighting for my freedom. All the wars in the last 100 years are about saving European royal scum from the natives. You people don't care for freedom just doctrine.

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