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Neighbors say development could wreck Mesa's 'backyard'

By MIKE WIGGINS
The Daily Sentinel

Saturday, March 29, 2008

To Vicki Felmlee, the dirt path scratched out in the high desert bluffs a short jaunt up the hill from her house is more than scenic open space. To her and others, the Old Spanish Trail is "Mesa County's backyard" and a part of the heritage of the West.

It's why, when Felmlee and her husband, Tom Martinez, stumbled upon the remnants of a party the day before a trail dedication ceremony in 1996, they spent three hours filling 12 garbage bags with beer cans, bottles and other grimy garbage.

It's why they're working even harder now to research and oppose a project they believe could threaten a trail that encapsulates nearly two centuries of American history.



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A Weld County developer whose company has purchased nearly 400 acres of land adjacent to the trail in the last two years is seeking to annex 17 of those acres into the city of Grand Junction, with plans to build a 30- to 40-home subdivision. The property is at 166 Edlun Road, south of the intersection of U.S. Highway 50 and 28 1/2 Road.

The project, though, appears to have a number of hurdles to clear before it can get off the ground, beginning with an indictment a Weld County grand jury handed up last week against the developer, Mark Strodman.

Strodman also is being sued by a group of Weld County homeowners who claim he defrauded them into buying homes they couldn't afford by falsifying documents to approve them for loans, according to the Greeley Tribune. Many of the homes have since foreclosed.

Neighbors in Mesa County who have dug deep into records at the Mesa County Courthouse also point to a perpetual easement the Bureau of Land Management owns near the trailhead. Felmlie believes Strodman wants to use the easement as a city road to access the development.

BLM spokeswoman Mel Lloyd said it's doubtful the agency would vacate that easement, which is more than 860 feet long and roughly 20 feet wide, for Strodman's project.

"It's not likely that the BLM would vacate any kind of easement as far as this gentleman obtaining access to his property," Lloyd said. "If there is a way on private land for him to obtain access to his parcel, then the BLM would not grant him any kind of right-of-way, so he would need to go about it through private land access."

Strodman could not be reached for comment for this story.

The Old Spanish Trail winds through six states, with the north Branch following the Colorado River through the Grand Valley before meeting up with the main branch in Green River, Utah. Used as early as the late 1700s by European explorers, the trail was most extensively used in the early and mid-1800s for commercial and slave trading and horse thievery.

President Bush signed a law in 2002 designating the trail as a national historic trail. It is now one of 17 such trails in the country.

The engineer for Strodman's company, The Shores LLC, notified Orchard Mesa neighbors in January that Strodman planned to seek to annex the property into the city. A neighborhood meeting was held in February to discuss the project. Strodman's company filed an annexation petition earlier this month, but the petition was rejected because a map of the property wasn't certified, according to Ivy Williams, the city's development services supervisor.

"Same old stuff," Jess Wallace, senior project engineer with Pickett Engineering, said of the neighbors' reaction during last month's neighborhood meeting. "People don't want development in their backyard."

When asked about Strodman's plans for the roughly 360 acres he owns next to the 17-acre parcel, Wallace said, "I have no idea."

The 360 acres are bisected by the Old Spanish Trail.

Neighbors say they are not opposed to any development in the area. They say they just want the trail to be protected.

"This is not just a local thing," Orchard Mesa resident Joe Hayes said. "The Old Spanish Trail is part of our national heritage, and we are



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fortunate to have part of it come through Grand Junction.

“Should we give it all up because some dubious character from another part of the state wants to make a lot of money?”

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E-mail Mike Wiggins at mwiggins@gjds.com.

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