

2-24-25

To: Huerfano Board of County Commissioners  
From: Lois Adams  
Re: Cuchara Mountain Park Concessionaire Application

As someone who has been closely involved with the Cuchara Mountain Park from before it even existed, I would like to share these thoughts about using a for-profit concessionaire to run the CMP and for offering a long-term contract for such.

- The Cuchara Mountain Park is one of Huerfano County's gems, something to be treasured, deserving of our respect, and needing to be polished continually.
- Believe me. I understand from firsthand experience the costs and efforts required to maintain and improve it.
- I appreciate the limited resources in Huerfano County and understand your desire to seek a concessionaire to run the Park
- It appears the application from Buckhorn Ridge Outfitters (BRO) will offer an impressive array of amenities and resources to the county.
- Along with many advantages, contracting with a for-profit concessionaire with ambitious plans for our small county park (it's a mere 50 acres, after all) will bring significant changes that impact the very special nature of the Cuchara community, all those who have contributed to, and all who use and live near the Park.
- I respect your dedication as commissioners, and I trust that you will enter concessionaire negotiations wisely and for the benefit of residents of the county including those in the Cuchara who are not full-time residents and are thus unaware of this proposal.

It appears on reading the ideas presented by this company that there are benefits to the county with promise of great things to come, but it also brings a significant change to the Park with ramifications for residents and visitors, the environment, and county resources. With the desire to lessen unintended negative effects, I offer these thoughts.

**1. Realize and mitigate the significant change the BRO proposal would bring to the Park.**

**Facts:**

- i. As it moves from a public entity with input and financial assistance from the community to a for-profit business run by a private company and its investors, what was once free and open could well become fenced, regulated, and require fees for use of many of its amenities.
- ii. The Park was made possible through contributions from the community with the intent of providing a PUBLIC Park to be used and enjoyed by all for free. Those who contributed time and money to the Park did not anticipate that a private company would run the park for profit.

- iii. The economic situation of our county residents and surrounding neighbors, many of whom have enjoyed activities at the Park for free, could likely limit their ability to use the new facility.

**2. It is important to honor Cuchara and the Park's unique history/culture and ensure that it continues to be a community-centered public park.**

**Facts**

- i. The community raised the money to purchase and improve the Park: \$250,000+ to get it up and going. Donations were made with the understanding that the park would benefit the Huerfano County and Cuchara in particular.
- ii. The Panadero Ski Corporation is a local non-profit with community trust that has worked long and hard to create activities for all to use. They should not be overlooked and overstepped in future county plans. To do so would be a slap in the face to all in the community.
- iii. Jerry and JoVonne Fitzgerald lowered their price for the land significantly so that the county could acquire it as a public park.
- iv. Several grants that benefited the Park have been written by community members specifically in good faith for its continuance as a nonprofit run entity. (GOCO, Bar-NI - 2 grants, IMBA, Huerfano Parks and Rec. to name a few of the early ones.)
- v. The county has two other free county parks and the CMP is in reality a third one and should be treated as such. The Day Lodge should be considered a third community center and has offered free access for community events and meetings. Having this facility provides equal access to community meetings that is offered to citizens in Walsenburg and Gardner through the other two county centers. There must be a public county community center in all three districts to provide equity to the tax payers.
- vi. The community is highly invested in the Park, as demonstrated by their ongoing use, interest in, and support of it. There is a sense of ownership and pride. A new management arrangement will lead to a switch of "we can do this for our Park" to one of "they'll do what they want to with it so why should we be involved" that could result in loss of the area's sense of involvement, commitment, and community pride. And thus, switching to a for-profit organization would ultimately hurt the community and the whole county more than help it.

**3. Keep in mind the size of the Park and the ambitiousness of the Plan**

**Facts**

The Park is small: 48 acres, in total. Eight of those acres are a long narrow hiking/biking trail and 9-basket disc golf area. There is no room for other activities on that stretch. That leaves 40 acres for the other activities land for tiny homes.

Winter activities would most likely include

- Access to Cross country skiing - would there be a charge?

- Chair lift for down-hill skiing – for pay who pays to get it up and to keep it running? **The second park plan paid for by Huerfano county pointed out that the only way for the Park to succeed would be if it were run as a non-profit as trying to offer downhill skiing is just too expensive to turn a profit.**
- Multiple small home homes – pay to use but how are they financed to build?
- Snowshoeing and sledding – might require paying but have been the most popular free activities in the past.
- The plan’s estimation for visitors to use a nonexistent lift is quite optimistic and one must wonder what happens if that doesn’t materialize. Who pays to get it built, approved, maintained and operating? Just ask Panadero Ski Corp how expensive and prohibitive all those costs are.
- Summer activities that bring money also bring crowds, traffic and pollution at a time when the area is already maxed out. During summer months there is no need nor room for more tourists: housing is full, restaurants over-crowded, parking non-existent now, let alone for an increase in numbers projected.

### **Conclusion**

The environment in small Cuchara and at the equally small Park obviously will be affected by the additional amenities and by increase in people coming to the area that are proposed by the for profit BRO. They must have increases in these areas to make a profit – but is it possible? And at what cost to the treasure that is now Cuchara and the CMP? With this in mind, it would be helpful and a proactive measure for all concerned, to require BRO to submit a specific plan to be approved and monitored by the county and a county citizen committee showing how they will cover the costs and impacts associated with their proposed increases in visitors , amenities and use. Possible inclusions in a written agreement:

1. specific details about the plan to add to and improve at the park: what each addition will cost, where things will be placed, and how they will pay for each improvement (including the proposed zip line.)
2. their estimate of water needed and where it will come from,
3. the maximum number of visitors they will allow at the Park, and specific procedures to control the number of visitors, if needed.

It would be informative to have persons with ecology and land management experience offer advice on what amenities and how many people the Park can safely and reasonably sustain.

4. how they plan to mitigate the impact on the Park of their planned activities and the estimated number of visitors,
  5. information about where they will park visitors' cars
  6. what they will contribute to road improvements and other county infrastructure affected by the increase in people and equipment,
  7. and - what will BRO do to keep their neighbors happy when visitors, traffic, and noise increase.
- ii. Require BRO to pay a reasonable fee or share a very significant portion of their yearly profits with the county.
  - iii. Provide a commitment from the county to the citizens that they will use a portion of the revenue from the lease to benefit the community, thus acknowledging those in the community who investor to purchase the land and make initial improvements.

### **Summary**

Because of the significance and magnitude of the changes to the Park presented in the BRO proposal, it will take time to assess the ramifications to make the wisest decisions for the good of all parties. This is critical if the contract will be for a long time and with someone unknown to the community. The change from a community-centered/led park to a for-profit business is a cultural change for the community, for which we have not had time to discuss nor for which are we prepared.

In addition, because we are in uncertain times with likely climate changes affecting the delicate high altitude, decisions about the uses of the Park and the numbers of people visiting it are more critical than ever.

Further, to ignore or downplay the contributions of the locals involved in the Panadero Ski Corporation at the Park is a real slap in the faces of all of us in the community who support their efforts and want the Park to remain a Huerfano treasure.

What seem like attractive plans and viable projections on paper may, in fact, not be what is ultimately possible nor desirable. Time is needed for you, the Commissioners, Panadero Ski Corporation, and the citizens of Huerfano County (including the many out-of-county folks with second homes in Cuchara) to study and digest what has been proposed in this ambitious plan. Please allow the time for us as a community to do that.

**Bottom line, esteemed Commissioners, my humble advice. We have a gem in the Cuchara Mountain Park. But it isn't the kind of jewel that can be sold for a profit. It is the kind that is best polished tenderly and appreciated for its natural beauty. Past experience and paid studies have shown that to be the case. The CMP is a small beautiful diamond in the rough and not fit for commercialization with lots of infrastructure and large influxes of people. The same can be said, actually, for the whole Cuchara Valley. Commercialized it and lose what brings people to it. Do so at great risk.**

**Treasure the Park as it is, entrust the Panadero Ski Corp to tend it carefully and it will enhance our county for years to come. Try to make money on it with glitz and glamor and you will lose the charm and attraction it currently offers our county's residents and visitors.**

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you. I submit them after much thought, with the hope that they will be helpful as you determine the future of the Huerfano County Parker Fitzgerald Cuchara Mountain Park, a special little place loved and treasured by many.