Breathing life into Crystal Meadows

County approves reopening of dormant resort

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Imagine creating a business plan for an RV park and, lo and behold, stumbling upon a dormant resort that already offers many of the envisioned attractions — in an area, no less, underserved by camping facilities.

That’s the story Emily and Paul St Ruth tell of their discovery — and pending purchase — of Crystal Meadows Resort near the northern tip of Gunnison County. The St Ruths are two-thirds of a company called Outdoor Hospitality Solutions.

With partner and successful businessman Jim Smith, the St Ruths, of Gypsum, plan to bring Crystal Meadows back to commercial life — with the possibility of the resort serving as a flag-ship location for a string of similar RV parks across the country.

Outdoor Hospitality Solutions was granted approval by Gunnison County Planning Commission this past Friday to reopen the 25-acre resort. Plans include 23 RV sites, 40 campsites and nine cabins available for rent — all of which already exist on site.

Crystal Meadows is located at the confluence of Anthracite Creek and the North Fork of the Gunnison River off County Road 12, or Kebler Pass Road. The property, which was historically used as a campground, was purchased 13 years ago by billionaire Bill Koch and since then has only seen residential use.

Outdoor Hospitality Solutions expects to close on the property in mid-July, but the road to reopening Crystal Meadows has been years in the making.

Seeds planted for RV resort

Paul previously worked for the Serious Fun Network — formerly the Paul Newman Foundation — buying and managing four RV parks. For the past decade-and-a-half, Emily has worked in nonprofit fundraising. In fact, that’s how she found her way to Eagle County, fundraising for Roundup River Ranch, a camp for kids with life-threatening illnesses where she and Paul met.

“I didn’t grow up saying I’m going to be an RV park owner, but the opportunity has presented itself as seemingly a really great time,” Emily said.

Paul previously worked for the couple’s partner, Smith, developing a resort in Central America. The St Ruths credit Smith with coming up with the Outdoor Hospitality Solutions concept.

“One thing led to another and he said, ‘I want you to be the partner if you’re interested,’” Paul recalled. “It took my wife and I five or six months to make the decision. We were both quite happy with the positions we were in.”

After deciding to give it a go, for the last two-and-a-half years, the St Ruths have immersed themselves in the RV industry — traveling the country from Key West, Fla., to the Pacific Northwest, searching for areas within a couple days drive where there’s demand for a campground with modern amenities, and attending trade shows.

“I rented my house, packed my kids up in a coach and we hit the road for six months last winter,” Paul explained. “I didn’t have any fear about getting into this industry, but at the same time financially we were in a position where we could do it, and I wanted to understand it — find people who have built campgrounds. What did you do right, what did you do wrong? What would you do differently if you were to do it a second time?”

Outdoor Hospitality Solutions sees an opportunity to capitalize on a rapidly growing industry. Woodall’s Campground Management reports that the RV industry contributes more than $49.7 billion annually to the U.S. economy. And more than nine million households in the country try now own an RV — a 64 percent increase since 1980.

“We will always be involved”

As envisioned, Crystal Meadows would be the first developed RV park in Outdoor Hospitality Solutions’ chain, but the partners have secured other properties across the country as well.

“We know Colorado. We know the mountains,” Paul said. “We thought close to home made sense on different levels.”

Nestled between the West Elk and Raggeds ranges, and in close proximity to Grand Mesa and the Maroon Bells, the St Ruths see Crystal Meadows serving as a basecamp for numerous recreational opportunities.

The property also is just downstream from Dark Canyon, where the former world record bull elk was harvested.

“Usually, we find a campground and it’s been running for several years,” Paul said. “Well, the challenge with Crystal Meadows is it hasn’t been operating.”

As a result, Paul plans to spend coming months reopening cabins that — while structurally sound — have been uninhabited for more than a decade, as well as making other minor modifications to the property. The St Ruths expect Crystal Meadows to be fully operational by next spring. In coming years, the company plans to reopen a restaurant on the property.

Paul, Emily and their two young children plan to live at Crystal Meadows for the first few years the campground is operating — before moving on to the next RV park in the chain.

“We will always be involved,” Paul added.

During a public hearing before Planning Commission Friday, area residents spoke in favor of the vision for Crystal Meadows. That included Tom Glor, manager of Koch’s Bear Ranch, the property’s current owner.

“It’s a no-brainer for us to stand here and support this, but it’s even more exciting to walk with Paul and hear about his plans for this area,” Glor said.

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