

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 flagship 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 been 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 — building camps for kids. 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,



Outdoor Hospitality Solutions received approval last week to reopen Crystal Meadows Resort, images of which are seen here, near the intersection of Kebler Pass Road and Hwy. 133 at the northern tip of Gunnison 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 at 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 coun-

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 a lot of 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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Kelley Hall

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tion dates and total cost, are tentative until a bid is accepted. However, Feier said construction is expected to start within two months of a bid being accepted, and the addition would be finished by May 2018. Submissions are due by June 22, according to the bid request.

For two years, Hausdoerffer has raised funds for the project — currently totaling about \$1 million. That includes grants from the Boettcher Foundation and the El Pomar Foundation,

as well as funding from Western's reserve account. Crested Butte residents Margie and John Haley also donated to the project.

The addition will include nine offices for MEM professors and a "global classroom" to accommodate distance-learning students.

According to Hausdoerffer, the MEM program currently has students working and living in 15 different countries as well as areas throughout the United States.

The classroom will include video chat technology so distance-learning students and those in the classroom can communicate and collaborate

efficiently.

The MEM program's growth has been the driving force behind the expansion, officials say. However, the space also will be used by Western's Center for Environment and Sustainability and will be open to the Gunnison community.

"The expansion is our way of opening our door to the community as much as we can," Hausdoerffer said. "We'll have spaces here for them to meet, plan projects, bounce ideas off each other."

The Center for Environment and Sustainability is a program that connects students and faculty to create service and research projects for sus-

tainable communities. The center works closely with the Colorado Water Workshop, the Headwaters Conference, Coldharbour Ranch and other local sustainability groups. The addition will include a large office for these groups to utilize.

Western's Facility Services also are hard at work on other projects around campus.

Hurst Hall will be undergoing repairs for its heating, ventilation and air conditioning system this summer. Feier said the repair will cost \$1.6 million.

Paul Wright Gym will be undergoing improvements this summer as well, as the boiler and pipe systems will be

replaced. The project will cost \$1.2 million.

Both projects are expected to be done by the end of the summer.

Senate Bill 267, or the Sustainability of Rural Colorado measure, has provided funding for a new boiler for Kelley as well as flat-roof repair for Paul Wright Gym, Leslie J. Savage Library, Kelley and Hurst. The gym and library's tile roofs will also be repaired.

Feier added the facilities team is working on other projects as well, including faculty and staff housing, replacing the boiler and pipe systems in Escalante Terrace, and remodeling the floor in Chipeta Hall.