

## Land, Water and People

### Emotions Run High Over Wolf Creek Access

By Mike Blakeman

Now that we have completed a round of public scoping meetings, it is a good time to reflect a bit on the Wolf Creek Access Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Wolf Creek Access EIS is, of course, the analysis the Rio Grande National Forest is conducting that will help determine the location and means of access that will be allowed across public land to the proposed Village at Wolf Creek.

Leavell-McCombs Joint Venture (LMJV) owns the private land on which the proposed Village is to be developed. This private property sits right below Wolf Creek Ski Area and is about 1500 feet from U.S. Highway 160. The Forest Service is conducting the analysis because the property is surrounded by National Forest System land and LMJV has submitted a special use application to access their property. According to the Alaska National Interest Land Conservation Act, the Forest must allow access to the private land since it is surrounded by National Forest System land.

Many SLV residents have strong opinions about the proposed Village and I've identified three basic "camps" of people that are following the project. There are those who are for the Village, those that are against it and those that are neutral. Many of the people that take a more neutral stance recognize that LMJV owns the property below the ski area and feel that they have the right to develop the land. This group is not highly emotional about the proposed project.

Emotions run high—real high—among the other two groups and some within these groups use similar strategies in their attempts to reach their goals. Some of the folks that do not want to see the Village developed will try to slow down the EIS process by arguing that the scoping/comment periods are too short, the Forest Service has not done enough analysis and they will float conspiracy theories. Whereas some of the people strongly in favor of the development will try to speed up the EIS process by claiming the scoping/comment period is too long, that the Forest Service is doing too much analysis and they too will float conspiracy theories.

Organized groups within the two camps also like to send out alerts that are designed to stoke the emotional fires to motivate people to act, and give, for their cause. They also prefer public hearing style meetings over open house style meetings, so that they can take their platform to larger audiences.

It is important to note that it is precisely these people with passion and groups with a collective passion that provide much of the input that helps the Forest Service identify important issues and develop alternatives to analyze in the EIS. So, in no way am I condemning these folks, rather I want to encourage all people to be critical consumers of information concerning the Wolf Creek Access EIS. Know the source, know the agenda, and check the facts.

That is precisely what the Forest Service Wolf Creek Access EIS team must do, along with an unbiased environmental analysis, to provide Forest Supervisor, Dan Dallas, with the information he needs to make the best decision regarding the location and means of access to LMJV's private property.

*Mike Blakeman is the public affairs officer for the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center. When not working, he's most often found scrambling around the mountains in the Upper Rio Grande Basin with a camera in his hand.*