



SIZZLIN' SUMMER AT THE I BAR ROUNDUP, B1

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The long road to Signal Peak

Trails concept years in making; sportsmen still feel unheard

Will Shoemaker
Times Editor

Elijah Waters quickly earned a reputation after taking the helm of the Bureau of Land Management's Gunnison Field

Office in 2015. When a proposal for a new project landed on the desks of office staff, Waters was quick to ask, "What does the plan say?"

Specifically, the field office manager's frequent query was in

reference to the area's Resource Management Plan — a big-picture document that stipulates suitability for certain activities, such as grazing or recreation.

"A plan is essentially a contract for how you manage that

land," Waters explained. "When you start to deviate from that, that's when you get in trouble."

That idea has formed the basis for BLM's proposed action for

Signal Peak A6



Bobby Reyes

A People person

Gunnison High School students celebrated the coming end of the school year this past Friday through the annual Spring Fest celebration. As part of the festivities, Julia Jacobson is seen here receiving a senior superlative for "Most Likely to Appear on the Cover of People." For more from Spring Fest, see B8.



McGowan

Leadership change in store for ICELab

Programming 'uninterrupted' as director announces resignation

Alan Wartes
Times Staff Writer

After nearly a year on the job, Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and ICELab Director Gerrit McGowan abruptly announced his resignation last week. McGowan stepped down as director of the ICELab effective May 10 and will leave the SBDC post at the end of the month.

He was unavailable for comment as of press time, and Western State Colorado University leaders said McGowan did not offer a reason for his departure. However, according to Delaney Keating, ICELab consultant in charge of strategic partnerships and

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The end of a homeschool era

Margaret Cranor looks back on three decades of teaching

Alan Wartes
Times Staff Writer

If a time lapse video camera — positioned above the Cranor family dining room table — had recorded the last 29 years in the

lives of the children, the changes we'd see today as we played it back would be breathtaking: Five kids sprouting into adulthood, nourished by a stream of books (later joined by computers) and tailor-made projects and experiences.

Where the same film for most families would have recorded the kids rushing off to school each morning, the Cranors always cleared away breakfast to study at home — guided by the one element in the scene that never wavers, through all

Homeschool A6



Alan Wartes

This year, Margaret Cranor will conclude 29 years of continuous home education when the last of her five children finishes high school.

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Homeschool

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the flurry of coming and going: Margaret Cranor.

This month, Cranor's 29-year tenure as homeschool headmaster officially comes to a close. The youngest of the kids, Clara, will complete high school and head off to Connecticut to study cyber security at a military college there.

"It's been a long journey," she says. "I wish I had one more kid. It bugs me to finish at 29 years, I like things to be even. I guess I'll have to borrow a kid for a year."

Because Cranor is a licensed teacher in Colorado, she technically has run a private school at home — but the practical difference between that and how most "home educators" operate is small. And though parents who choose to school at home have a variety of reasons for

doing so, Cranor's motivation was simple: to provide her kids the best possible opportunity to learn. To her that meant the freedom to tailor instruction to the child's specific needs and learning style.

"It really started the day I went to visit the best preschool in town," she recalls. "I watched the kids line up to go to the bathroom and line up to get their snack. They rode tricycles, but they only could go one direction in the driveway. I came home and said to Walt, 'You know for 30 dollars a month — which was a lot of money back then — I think we can do better.'"

Cranor quickly clarifies that "doing better" is not a criticism of hard-working and dedicated teachers in traditional classrooms. Rather, it's about seizing the opportunity to "really focus in on what each kid wants out of life."

The Cranor family embarked on their home education journey in 1988 — at the very moment when it became legal in Colorado to do so. Senate Bill 65 passed in May of that year after a lengthy political tug of war between parents and lawmakers.

"Few people are aware that the homeschool law we operate under now was pioneered by people in this valley," Cranor said. "These were the pioneers, the folks putting themselves out there, willing to go to jail."

Next came the "settlers" — the group to which her family belongs, she says. "We were still having to break ground, but we got busy putting up our sod houses and getting entrenched."

In 1993, this wave of homeschool families pushed for additional legislation allowing their kids to freely participate in extracurricular activities like theater and sports.

"Now we have the refugees," she says. "They are homeschooling because they feel forced to, for whatever reason, whether it's giftedness, dyslexia, they live on a boat — whatever it is, it's the only option for their child."

Cranor believes changing economic conditions have made it steadily harder for many families to school at home — because both parents typically must earn an income to make ends meet.

A positive social change through the last three decades can be seen in the Cranor kids themselves — in particular, professional opportunities now open to women that haven't always been available. Sarah is a world-class musician; Becca flies helicopters for the U.S. Navy; Hannah hopes to run the family ranch; and Clara will study computer science. The lone boy in the brood, Tim, will soon graduate from Colorado School of

Mines with a degree in computer science.

"When I graduated high school (in 1973), the stuff a woman was allowed to do was pretty narrow — you could be a nurse or a teacher," she recalls. "I wanted to go into forestry, but women couldn't go into that at the time. It's so fun to see my kids have more opportunity."

Cranor conceded that retirement from schooling her own kids is unlikely to be the end of her decades-long role as cheerleader and facilitator for others — as she rushed off to advise a Gunnison grandmother who has taken on the task of educating a grandson struggling in school.

"It'll always be about the kids and what's best for them," she said.

(Alan Wartes can be contacted at 970.641.1414 or alan@gunnisontimes.com.)

McGowan

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programming, project leaders foresee little to no disruption to the organization's full summer schedule of events. In particular, she said, the Business Accelerator — an intensive "business bootcamp" set for launch this August — is moving ahead as planned.

"The ICELab is carving forward and we're shifting and looking at how we make our next moves," Keating said.

"Building new projects like this can be overwhelming and stressful and sometimes, in the initial phase, burn through staff."

The ICELab is a new economic development initiative located on the Western campus aimed at creating an "entrepreneurial ecosystem" in western Colorado. The project is paid for largely through a grant for \$649,000 from the federal Economic Development Administration — to offset the loss of coal mining jobs and revenue in Gunnison and Delta

counties.

The SBDC is funded by the Small Business Administration, Colorado's Office of Economic Development and Western — where the West Central regional office is located. The organization is "dedicated to helping existing and new businesses grow and prosper through free, one-on-one consulting and ... business training programs."

McGowan, who has an extensive background as an entrepreneur and new business facilitator, served as director of both organizations.

"Ninety percent of Gerrit's job was to be on the road for the SBDC," said Keating. "Now we have an opportunity to pivot, readjust and make this project more sustainable for the future." Though a range of options remain on the table, that could mean separating the two positions to allow for more dedicated attention to ICELab functions, she said.

The ICELab is overseeing several parallel programs to provide assistance — and office space — to new and existing businesses in the

region. Those include monthly memberships — that provide access to office space, conference rooms and broadband internet access — speaker and film series events, and workshops.

"We've been saying from the beginning the importance of being agile in launching something this ambitious," said Keating. "This moment is allowing us to do that."

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Signal Peak

from A1

a new, non-motorized single-track trail system on a 13,000-acre swath of land in the vicinity of Signal Peak northeast of Gunnison for which comments are now being accepted. Agency leaders point not just to the 1993 Resource Management Plan, which identifies managing lands including Signal Peak for "a diversity of recreation opportunities," but also subsequent, public-involved planning processes over the last decade in paving the way for the controversial trail system.

At the same time, however, sportsmen and ranchers (see related story) say they've not been sufficiently heard and are mounting a fight against what they view as unbridled recreation development.

A long history

For decades, hikers, runners and mountain bikers have used the singletrack and doubletrack trails in the vicinity of Signal Peak for recreation and training — many of them old wildlife and cattle trails, or rudimentary roads first used for mineral exploration.

When Dave Wiens came to Western State Colorado University as a freshman in 1982, singletrack routes built by former ski coach Ken MacLennan were in place and used frequently by athletes preparing for the national stage.

More than two decades later, Wiens would form the single-track advocacy group Gunnison Trails, which adheres to a mis-

sion of maintaining routes, educating users and pursuing new trail opportunities. The latter of those objectives resulted in the nonprofit in 2006 pitching three separate proposals — Signal Peak, a system northwest of the city and the Gunnison-to-Crested Butte trail — as part of a years-long effort undertaken by the BLM and U.S. Forest Service to manage backcountry travel in the basin.

"Our proposals were very purposeful," explained Wiens, now a Gunnison Trails board member. "They're trails adjacent to and accessible from the City of Gunnison."

Following significant involvement by local elected leaders, other advocacy groups and the public, the end result was the 2010 Gunnison Basin Travel Management Plan. In it, however, only one of Gunnison Trails' three proposals was given clear go-ahead — Signal Peak, between Gunnison to the west and Cabin Creek to the east.

"While the goal of this system of new non-motorized trails would be to provide trail loops of varied lengths, the exact location of these trails has not been determined," the document stated.

A way to manage recreation

At the time, Gunnison Sage-grouse remained a major concern, with the bird's possible federal protection looming on the horizon. As a result, BLM subsequently undertook writing a document called a Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA), which sought to identify threats and enact protective measures to avoid the need to "list" the bird under the Endangered Species

Act.

It singled out recreation among the threats. However, the CCA identified the Signal Peak area and Hartman Rocks as so-called Urban Interface Recreation Areas "that would be managed for recreation use" — the thought being that keeping recreation close to Gunnison would protect outlying populations of the bird from future harm. The CCA received approval from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which determines whether species warrant federal protection.

While Fish and Wildlife ultimately listed the grouse as "threatened," as opposed to the more restrictive "endangered" designation, the contents of the CCA were rolled into the a Rangewide Management Plan amendment for the Gunnison Sage-grouse for which BLM accepted public comment from last August until January of this year. The document is currently awaiting final agency approval.

With the Signal Peak concept given a thumbs up in both the travel plan and CCA, BLM recently released the proposed action which identifies 7.8 miles of existing trails and 20 miles of newly constructed non-motorized routes — with a condition of seasonal closures to protect grouse and wintering deer herds.

"There's no reason to think that wildlife and recreation can't get along simultaneously if managed well," said Gunnison Trails Executive Director Tim Kugler. "We can be a model for other places."

Sportsmen left out?

In 2014, Gunnison Trails

received \$45,000 through the Colorado State Recreation Trails Grant Program to produce a plan for the Signal Peak trails. BLM partnered in the grant application, and in the ensuing years the trail advocacy group walked routes, surveyed the public and produced a master plan for the area.

As proposed to BLM, the document contained 45 miles of trails, which the agency whittled down to 28 over the last few months.

However, a group of sportsmen called Gunnison Wildlife Association (GWA) — which remained dormant for years after originally forming in the 1990s — was recently resurrected, and its members take issue with a sentence contained in the Signal Peak master plan. It reads: "The BLM also asked Gunnison Trails to confine outreach to Gunnison Trails constituents and not try to engage the broader interested community, including motorized trail users and sportsmen."

To sportsmen, it's proof that their concerns have been bypassed. However, BLM recreation planner Jim Lovelace says the agency's direction was in an attempt to keep other user groups from muddying the task at hand — producing a plan for non-motorized singletrack after the BLM in both the 2010 Travel Management Plan and CCA had deemed it a priority.

"The reason those other entities weren't contacted was because that wasn't the user group that would be using that trail system," he added. "What we're looking for now are specifics. Are there any issues or concerns that are not addressed

through the elements in the proposed action?"

Additionally, Lovelace noted that the trail system is a way of managing recreation long into the future.

"We're not just managing for this year or this season," he said. "This is our way of saying that as the needs of recreators dictate, as more people move into the valley, this is a tool we can use."

Still, the BLM maintains that a final decision has yet to be made. For example, "no action" — meaning trail construction would not be approved — is a possibility.

'A big deal for the future of wildlife'

GWA has raised numerous additional concerns about the plan — including fears that the BLM doesn't have the resources to enforce seasonal closures, possible impacts to deer that live in the area year-round and further degradation of the grouse population.

"How do you explain to a community that's paralyzed by sage grouse listing that it's OK for bicycles to invade every space?" GWA board member Navid Navidi posed.

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PUBLIC COMMENT

The public comment, or scoping, period for the BLM's proposed action ends May 22. To view a summary and map of the proposed action for trails in the Signal Peak area, and get instructions on how to comment, visit the BLM's ePlanning website at <https://go.usa.gov/xXsha>.