

Home, home on the range isn't always possible

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

For those who dream of building a home on the range amid the serene valleys and snow-capped peaks of south-central Wyoming, local officials have some discouraging words: "Ride on, stranger."

As more outsiders are drawn to the area, Carbon County has enacted a square-mile minimum for lots on land zoned as open range.

The goal is to prevent haphazard development and weed out casual buyers who might not realize they can't use open range for much more than hunting or camping.

Across the West, officials hoping to control growth have tried methods ranging from requiring voter approval for larger projects to selling development rights to conservationists.

In the Cascade foothills outside Seattle, for example, lots must be at least 80 acres.

In Carbon County, where there isn't a lot of sprawl, zoning officials took a pre-emptive step.

The new rule took effect in January and it has many natives riled up, especially cattle ranchers who consider the right to subdivide and sell their land as sacred.

"The way this is going, we will have no property rights. The county will be dictating to us everything we can do with every stitch of our property," said G.G. Kortes, a rancher and president of the Carbon County Farm Bureau.

Virtually the entire county is zoned as open range, where cattle can roam and graze at will and where new housing unrelated to agriculture is prohibited.

Not everyone bothers to research such details when they buy plots of open range, often based on an ad they see on the Internet.

After a few years of using their own little piece of the West as a private camping area, some are unpleasantly surprised when they

Buying a square mile is hardly a casual transaction. It's 640 acres, or three-quarters the size of Central Park in New York. Presumably anyone who would shell out that kind of money — perhaps \$500,000 or more — knows what they are getting into.

look into building a cabin and discover it's illegal, according to county planning director Jay Grabow.

"People got what they paid for. They got a 40-acre piece of open range land," Grabow said. "But that open range zone didn't have any residential development rights to it."

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Ranchers, meanwhile, say the new rule has cost them their best insurance against lean times. Until now, they could divide open range into lots of, say, 40 or 80 acres, put in some dirt roads and sell the land.

Landowners can still ask county officials for a zoning change allowing residential or recreational use. But they're not likely to win approval unless the land is accessible to fire trucks, ambulances and school buses, and no existing building clutter the view.

Carbon County may not be booming — its nearly 8,000 square miles are home to fewer than 16,000 people, down 6 percent

from 1990 — but it is in flux.

Young people are moving out and retirees, some with a little money, some with a lot, are moving in, lured by no state income tax and a plethora of outdoor things to do.

There are two huge reservoirs here, linked by a world-famous trout stream, the North Platte River's Miracle Mile. The southern half of the county is separated from Colorado by rugged mountains and thick forests crisscrossed by trails for hiking, skiing and snowmobiling.

"We have our share of the really, truly wealthy people that come here," said county Planning Commissioner Sonja Collamer, who lives in Saratoga. "The people that come to my church that have come in, they are retirees who are middle-of-the-road. They want access to recreation and such that still isn't Vail or Jackson Hole."

"The culture of the town hasn't changed tremendously. But that's the direction where we're going," Collamer said.

Doug Caffery of Costa Mesa, Calif., who has sold tens of thousands of acres of remote sagebrush country in the county through his Coyote Springs Land Co., calls the rule a flat-out land grab and predicts a lawsuit.

"It's the only county in the United States of America where they say there is no use of land less than 640 acres in size," he said.

"Are we saying then, have we come to the point in America, where we don't want you to build a home out in the country, out on the prairie, because we don't think it's good for you and the kids?"

Collamer said she understands such concerns but notes that Carbon County has had a land-use plan in place for three decades. "The question is whether we want to do what is in our land use plan, which is preserve open space and encourage responsible development," she said.

Open corner serves as computer 'room'

FOR AP WEEKLY FEATURES

Where in the world do you put the Worldwide Web?

This is a dilemma many families face in their homes. A computer is a magnet for family activity together, but can also cause accumulation of papers, disks and junk.

Placing the computer area out of sight by tucking it into its own room isn't necessarily the answer because keeping an eye on young Web surfers is important to parents.

A computer center is a design option that can be incorporated into new homes or retrofitted into existing ones quite easily.

Just find an open corner, preferably near the kitchen or family room. Add half-walls, columns, ceiling beams, countertops and an upper cabinet and voila — the ideal spot.

The area is large enough for kids to pull up a couple of folding chairs while surfing or gaming together, but not so large as to take up the entire room.

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