

Crested Butte, and maybe even Red Lady bowl (upper left), will see changes, but signature steeps like The Peel will still have its fans. Photo: Chuck Patterson. PHOTO: HANK DE VRE

# ADAPTATIONS

## MONEY AND MINES RETURN TO CRESTED BUTTE

RESIDENTS OF CRESTED BUTTE WERE IN A jubilant mood in March, after the official announcement came that Tim and Diane Mueller were the proud new owners of the resort. But spirits fell just a month later, when the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) sold 155 acres of prime Gunnison National Forest lands to mining corporation Phelps Dodge. What made residents even more angry than where the land was located—on top of Mt. Emmons, home to the prominent backcountry run known as Red Lady bowl—was the price paid for it: \$875, or roughly five bucks an acre.

"For less than \$1,000, Phelps Dodge has acquired 150 acres of federal property next to a resort town where one tenth of an acre is selling for \$100,000," said Crested Butte mayor Jim Schmidt. The sale, approved under the anachronistic General Mining Law of 1872, shocked residents who have fought the development of mining there for more than thirty years. And even though Phelps Dodge isn't sure if they want to build the mine or not (at least until the price of Molybdenum ore goes up), the problem for skiers isn't just mining, it's trespassing. Phelps Dodge has long held mining claims to the area, but the new land acquisition now gives them surface rights, which means a good portion of Red Lady bowl is now on private property. High Country Citizen's Alliance (HCCA), the town of Crested Butte, and Gunnison County recently filed a complaint and preliminary injunction against

Phelps Dodge that could at least return the land to the public until the court case is decided.

Amidst the struggle to defeat Phelps Dodge is the long overdue feeling of optimism. The Muellers are respected in the ski industry for revamping Okemo into the second most visited resort in Vermont, and for their ideology: They say their vision for Crested Butte only emphasizes everything that is unique about the area. Plans for Mt. Crested Butte include a luxury lodge, a new mountain base area, and the once-controversial development of Snodgrass, a small hill to the northwest of Mt. Crested Butte that would add extensively to Crested Butte's intermediate terrain. Overall, an estimated \$200 million in improvements are expected.

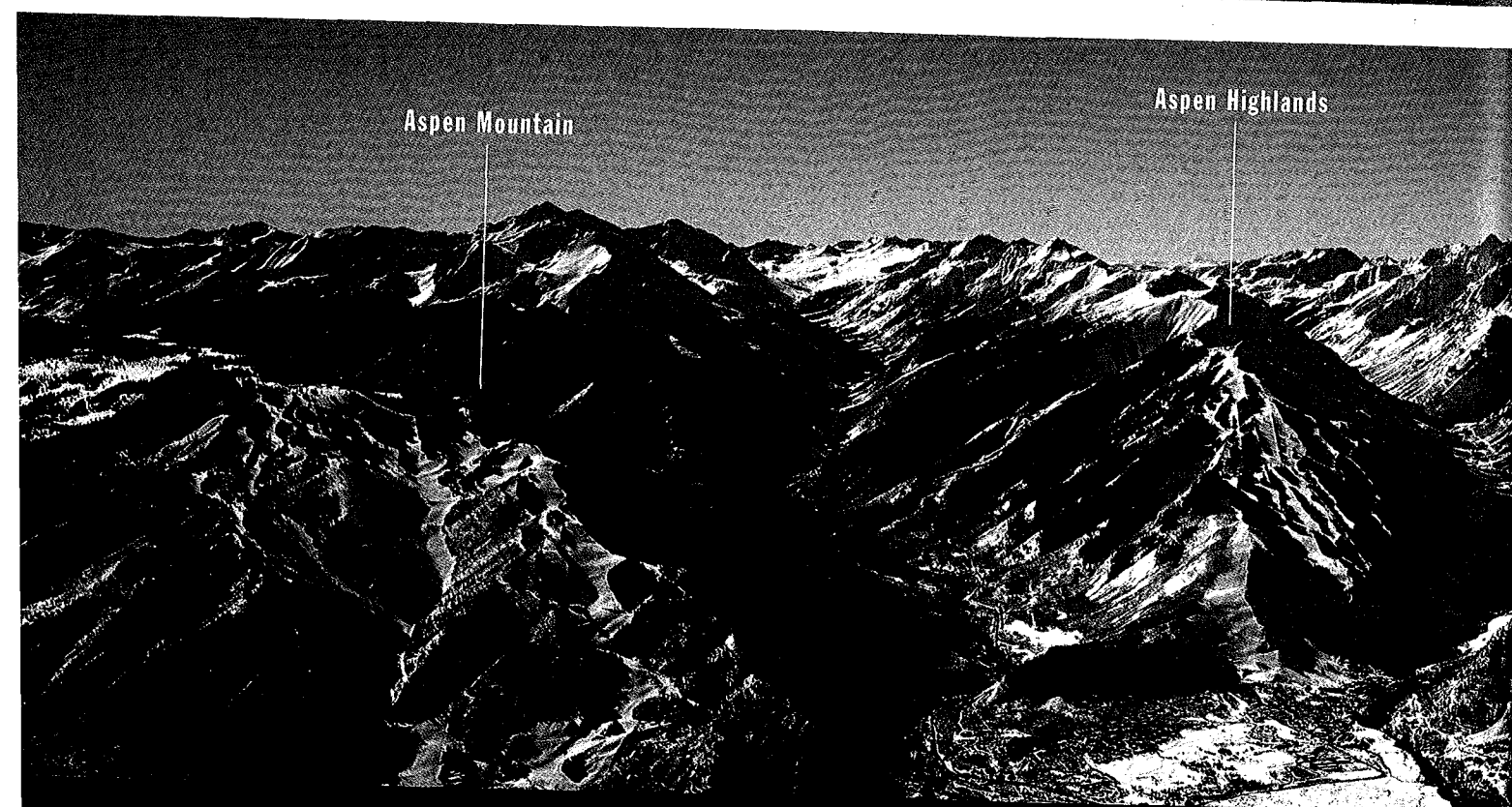
On many levels, locals are embracing the new ownership—and for good reason. The Muellers already ordered the equipment to upgrade to a Superpipe and make other improvements to the terrain park. They've also installed snowmaking on international—home of Mt. C.B.'s FIS races—and reinstated a pre-Thanksgiving opening date. Construction of Westwall, a five star, ski-in/ski-out property at the base of T-bar and Peachtree lifts, started in June. Add another slopeside complex opening this year—to be serviced by the Prospect chair, between the current Gold Link and East River chairs—and it's easy to see that the market in Crested Butte is changing.

Just ask any of the real estate agents in town,

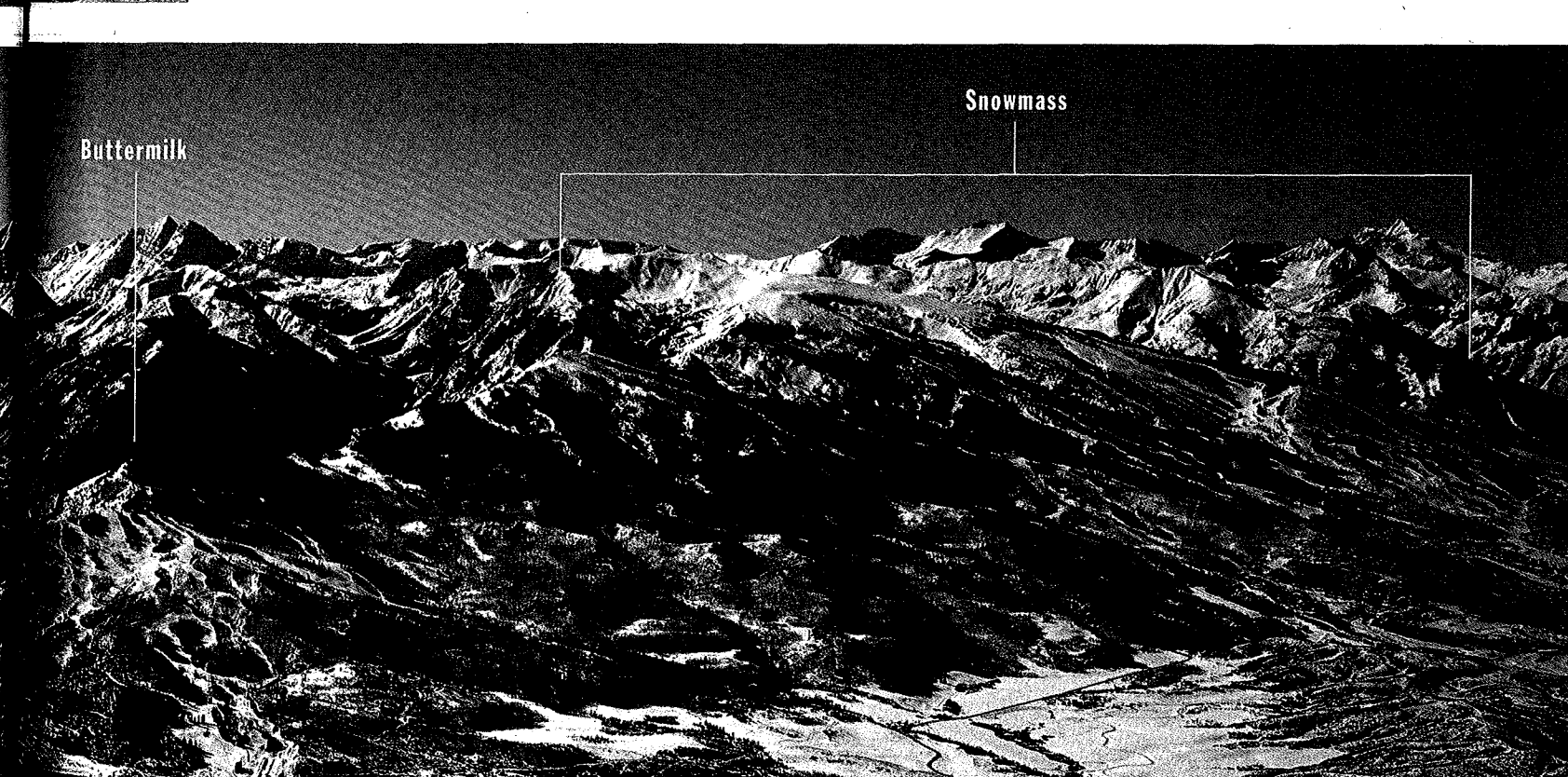
if they have time to talk. Real Estate prices have shot through the roof since the Muellers bought the resort, despite the fact that local economics in recent years has been shaky at best. Skier numbers have dropped to just over 300,000 after reaching over half a million in Crested Butte's heyday in the early nineties. The resort's goal for 2004-05 is to crest 400,000, and eventually hit 600,000 consistently. "[350,000 skier days] just doesn't do it," CBMR projects consultant John Norton said in the *Crested Butte News*. "We need to be busier." Whether or not that happens may be more at the whim of Mother Nature. Crested Butte has a reputation of feast-or-famine snowfall. Not to mention that remote and isolated Crested Butte is a far cry from Okemo, which is within a day's drive of at least three major metropolitan areas bigger than Denver.

Meanwhile, the specter of Phelps Dodge looms, waiting to swoop down and destroy views, some of the best backcountry in the state, the marketability of Crested Butte as a pristine spot, and the morale of a town poised on the edge of making it.

On the other hand, there are the kindly faces of Tim and Dianne Mueller, soaring in to save a ski-resort on its way down. But even the Muellers have admitted some trepidation. "The welcome was flattering and somewhat daunting," Tim Mueller said. "I hope people won't be disillusioned if they don't see immediate transformation." —Lena Rogue



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