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Inside Today: The View, p3; News, p4; Voices, p8; Business, p9; Orbit, the back page

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AFTER CONDEMNATION, TOWN ASSESS ITS NEW PARK

What's out there on the Valley Floor?

By REILLY CAPPS
Staff Writer

Before it legally took the Valley Floor it from its previous owner, Telluride appraised the land at its doorstep at \$26 million.

After a protracted court case, the town paid \$50 million.

Now that Telluride owns the Floor, the town has paid for a more thorough appraisal of its ecological health, and a team of ecologists from Boulder has

spent the past several months surveying the floor.

The team presented its findings over the past two days to a Rebekah Hall room filled with dozens of the Valley Floor's proud new owners.

What the town got was a long, skinny glacier deposit bursting

Ecologists find healthy, diverse floor with sewer ponds

with ecological diversity, wetlands, native prairie dogs and a possible migration path for an endangered species (lynx), historical artifacts from the valley's first settlers to a fairly recent pair of sewer ponds. The Floor is a mix of highly sensitive wetlands and cruddy mine tailings.

"Highly sensitive" areas account for only 24 percent of the floor, the ecologists reported, concentrated on the east and west ends — mostly wetlands near the Pearl Property and where the river wanders near Society Turn.

It said 71 percent of the land is "moderately sensitive," and 6 percent is not very sensitive.

The ecologists' map will soon be posted to the town's Web site.

See **VALLEY FLOOR**, Page 6

What's out there?

VALLEY FLOOR, from page 1

The research was performed by Ecological Resource Consultants, a Boulder company that promises a "breadth of experience [that] allows us to ... maximize your property by restoring and enhancing the natural balance in your ecosystem."

If Telluride wanted to "maximize" its property, what could be done to "restore and enhance" it?

Well, you could knock down the berms that keep the river from flooding the way it normally would, you could move the railroad that now straightjackets the river close to town and prevents it from meandering. You could remove the tailings piles and erase the remnants of the sewer ponds.

Would the cost of those projects — almost sure to run into the millions — be worth it?

Ecologist David Blauch said those types of questions were for the local government to decide.

Telluriders love their Valley Floor and want it not to be hurt, and demonstrated knowledge of the area down to the square foot. They even sometimes try to take care of it themselves — which the town's managers don't always appreciate. For instance: someone went out and cut some of the barbed wire strung between fence posts, apparently with the idea that it would help elk migration. They probably meant well, but it turned out that the fence wasn't hampering elk migration and was actually helping hold up a fence with historical value, since it demarcated the line of an old placer claim, a historian said. Thanks to their love, the fence will fall down sooner rather than later, and will have to be propped up.

History is also a part of the

Floor's value, and ERC found plenty. But it found no evidence of pre-history. So while the Utes, the Valley's original second homeowners, did summer in Telluride, anything they left behind has either disintegrated or been collected by miners.

Archeologist Sean Larimore said that it's generally up to the town government to decide which historical artifacts — fences, for example — the town wants to keep.

The most tangible physical historical evidence, Larimore said, is the Rio Grande Southern Railroad. There are almost certainly remains of the old San Miguel City, the area's first settlement, built where the Shell station now sits, but any artifacts are below the ground and not easily discovered except by digging or by sonar.

The metal entrance to the old Tillman Beam ranch is still intact, and there are the barest scars from a horse-racing track from the 1920s and 30s.

There's the llama shed at the entrance to town, the one that leans to the south. Larimore suggested stabilizing the shed or restoring it, until a town employee offered another perspective.

"It's actually stable in its leaning condition," Lance McDonald offered. "That's the way we do things here."

Long time resident Jerry Greene put up a defense of the sewer ponds, saying they should not be erased from the face of the earth.

"They tell some of the story," he said, of how Telluride came to own the Valley Floor.

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