

The Nation



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A landowner's plan to build on his 860-acre parcel in the valley floor of Telluride, Colo. has sparked a court battle. In a special election, locals approved condemning Neal Blue's property, which doesn't fall within town limits but is under the county's jurisdiction.

Development Plans Fueling Range War

Colorado: A wealthy owner of 860 acres outside Telluride has big ideas for his parcel. The tiny, affluent town poses a formidable opponent.

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TELLURIDE, Colo.—The drive to Telluride is a journey through beauty. The long snaking road climbs through a crack in the angular San Juan Mountains and finally issues out to the valley floor, a 3-mile-long swath of green where cattle graze amid wildflowers.

This is the frontyard to Telluride, a storied mining settlement where ascending tiers of violet and green-painted Victorian homes cling precariously to the mountainside and the entire town backs into a box canyon.

The only way in and out of town is to cross the narrow valley floor. It may be the most disputed slice of property in Colorado.

Fights over land are hardly new in this region, where such disagreements were once settled with guns. What's happening now is an updated Western duel in which a



Neal Blue got land in 1983.

sides are entrenched. The town wants control of the land. Blue says it's not for sale.

This summer, Telluride raised the stakes. In a special election, voters overwhelmingly gave approval for the town to condemn

Blue's property.

Condemnation is seen by some as an audacious maneuver, especially considering the valley floor property lies not in Telluride but in the jurisdiction of San Miguel County and anyway is somewhat larger in area than Telluride.

But this town's ambitions have never been limited by its size.

A Mid-1800s Theme

Telluride is but a mile long. A jumble of homes and condos radiate from Main Street, maintaining an architectural theme from the mid-1800s. Driving is discouraged: Most people walk or bike. Neither bikes nor homes are locked here.

The entire town is on the National Register of Historic Places and, through restrictive zoning, zealously maintains its quaintness.

Val Kilmer and Daryl Hannah, all residents of the area. Few of the very rich live in the town itself, preferring the mesas above it.

Other wealthy landowners are EBay Chief Executive leg Whitman, AT&T Chief Executive C. Michael Armstrong, and Robert W. Pittman, who until last month was chief operating officer of AOL Time Warner.

In a battle of deep pockets, Telluride can more than hold its own. The town has socked away about \$6 million to buy land for open space, and a local environmental group has raised about \$3 million to purchase the valley floor, back when that was still a possibility.

With money from a bad measure and other funds, Telluride has a war chest of nearly \$19 million. This from a town that has barely 2,000 full-time residents.

"People see this as David versus Goliath," said Telluride Mayor John Steel, an East Coast transplant who favors a white cowboy hat. "But it's really Goliath against Goliath."

An Opaque Personality

As long as anybody can remember, there have been arguments about the future of the valley floor. The Idarado Corp., which for decades mined gold in the region, sold



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Miguel County Planning Office.

The misfired fax stirred the passions of anyone left in town who had failed to form an opinion on the matter. The general feeling was that Blue had finally tipped his hand and shown that he planned to erect a monstrosity that would essentially trash the neighborhood.

"The fax was a turning point. Everything fell apart after that; the middle ground was lost," Levek said. "Telluride can be very difficult, very involved and opinionated. After the fax, things were more polarized."

Levek, who supports condemning the property, said the goal is to preserve the essential character of Telluride. Others see an economic element at work: Telluride earns its tourism income because of its pristine setting. That makes the town