

Victor Dover

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Special

Kayakers Katie Selby, 28, above, and her brother, Jed, 25, say they were motivated to buy the land when a time-share developer bid on it and wanted to close public access to the river.

Padding upstream

Two siblings who are also expert kayakers jump into uncharted waters in Buena Vista by becoming land developers, taking a parcel along the Arkansas River and proposing a "New Urbanism" community.

By Jason Blevins
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Buena Vista - Jed Selby is wedged in his kitchen nook, searching his laptop for "that picture."

"Here it is," he says, turning the machine toward a visitor.

It's him in an orange kayak. He's leaning forward with an outstretched paddle and dropping off a 30-foot waterfall on the Oh-Be-Joyful Creek outside Crested Butte. The creek is swollen with the spring runoff, and Selby, a 25-year-old professional kayaker, is in perfect form.

His sister Katie leans in with a CD-ROM.

"Check out this one," the 28-year-old says, loading it in the machine.

It's her in a kayak, upside down and airborne, skipping across a foaming wave the size of a tractor-trailer on Ontario's Ottawa River.

The Selbys have garnered international acclaim - medals, awards and accolades - for their paddling skills. But today, the professional paddlers are venturing into the biggest challenge of their lives. They are risking their reputations, their share of their family's fortune and the character of their hometown.

As land developers. Kayaking land developers.

The brother and sister have acquired a 40-acre parcel along the Arkansas River in Buena Vista, where they plan a 315-unit community that will increase the size of the humble river town by a third.

The Selbys envision a community based on architecture's "New Urbanism" concept featuring dense development mingling homes, offices and shops amid plazas and parks. The focal point of the project is the river, where the paddling pros plan to build the world's longest whitewater kayak park.

"That's how this whole thing got started. I saw this stretch of river, and I thought, 'This could be the best play park in the world,'" Jed says.

A crash course in land use

The idea for what they call South Main River Park was born when their most treasured stretch of river was threatened.

A time-share developer had made a bid on the 40-acre parcel, a vacant patch of scrub brush filled with broken bottles and rusted cans that ranked as the most expensive piece of land in town. The developer wanted to close public access to the river, which would shatter dreams of expanding Buena Vista's one-feature play park adjacent to and upstream from the parcel.

So the Selbys sold a family parcel in the Vail Valley - their dad, Buzz, an Arizona doctor and medical school professor, once owned the Roost Lodge there and has been investing in the valley for three decades - and bought the land in a no-strings deal that bested the developer's offer. Jed says they paid the equivalent of four homesites in Durango for the property.

They then began a crash course in land use.

Katie, who studied business at Fort Lewis College in Durango, wrote her first grant on behalf of the town. Jed began to shepherd the project through the lengthy local approval process.

They held town meetings to gather input on their plan. They hired one of the priciest planning firms in the country. They learned how wide walls need to be between row houses. They studied lighting fixtures for street lamps. They immersed themselves in concepts of New Urbanism - it got its start in Seaside, Fla., in 1981 - and visited neighborhoods where New Urbanism principles were on display. They wallowed in the minutiae that comes with building an entire community from scratch.

They learned, in two short years, how to be developers.

It's a mold they don't fit. Jed worries that he may have to start wearing a watch. His day planner has one entry so far this year. Katie bounces more than walks. She doles out hugs instead of handshakes.

They look like boaters though. Lean and broad-shouldered with shaggy hairdos, they radiate a ready-for-anything ease that comes from countless

Paddling paradise

Two siblings who are world-class kayakers have proposed a 40-acre land development and water park that could increase the population of Buena Vista by one-third.



hours paddling their plastic boats through daunting rapids and perfecting acrobatic tricks.

The title "developer" doesn't sit well with either of them. Once upon a time, the first developers were immortalized as town founders and honored with statues in parks and streets bearing their name. Not anymore.

"Something has happened to the way things are built that has ruined the stature and reputation of developers," Jed says.

"We are hoping to change that," Katie says.

The New Urbanism idea is to re-create density and open, communal spaces created 100 years ago, before the proliferation of car-dependent suburbs and sprawling yards separating giant homes. The concept can be seen in Longmont's Prospect community and the proposed Belmar community redevelopment in Lakewood.

It's a throwback to the "traditional neighborhoods" combining residential, commercial and public places. It changes the traditional code-based planning, which allows certain uses in certain areas - homes here and shops there - and relies on automobile traffic. New Urbanism is more dense and pedestrian-friendly, with garages in the back, front porches lining sidewalks and homes above shops. It creates a community where people can work, shop and play without buckling into a car seat.

Bill Roberts, editor of The Durango Herald's editorial page, recently wrote columns opposing a New Urbanism community proposed outside Durango. The Durango City Council ultimately rejected the plan.

Roberts thinks that some New Urbanism proposals can simply become a fancy label for sprawl by creating new urban centers.

"Labeling something New Urbanism doesn't make a bad thing a good thing," said Roberts, who was not familiar with the Selbys' plan. "I was struck by the advocates of it, just this religious zeal. Yeah, there are aspects of it that make perfect sense. But in places that already have a downtown, why go build a new one?"

The Selbys, however, are new New Urbanism disciples. They say their plan will give Buena Vista a real downtown instead of a mile-long stretch of highway lined with gas stations, eateries and shops. They hired a big-dollar firm - Dover Kohl & Partners from Florida - to help them craft a New Urbanist community that packs 315 units on 200 lots.

"It would have been so much safer for us to cut the land up and sell riverfront estates," Katie says. "But we wanted to look further. Dream a little, you know. We wanted to try and make a difference."

So far, the Selbys have fielded 21 reservations for the first phase of 22 lots - priced from \$38,000 to \$63,000 - without any marketing.

Most went to their paddling pals.

Attracting 800 new residents

Town leaders have embraced the Selbys' efforts. But it took some persuading.

"Initially, there were some members at the trustee level who were a little taken aback at the type of project being proposed," said Sharyle Solis, Buena Vista's mayor. "It is certainly atypical for what small town development has looked like over the past 50 years. And Katie and Jed are, well, atypical developers."

The Selbys have offered the town three acres of their land and \$30,000 to help the town secure a \$187,000 Great Outdoors Colorado grant to help extend the town's river park. Katie wrote the grant proposal. The town has promised another \$30,000, and a whitewater group has promised \$10,000 to help build paths and parks along the river and add kayak-friendly features to the river. Those features also work to improve fish habitat by creating deep pools at various flows.

The town council is expected to issue a final approval for the plan in the next two months.

As for the residents of Buena Vista, they've attended community meetings to get a closer look.

While most residents applaud the plan, some wonder how a town of 2,200 can attract 800 new residents. If the town's real estate agents keep selling homes at their regular pace, it would take 15 years to empty the supply of homes that are for sale right now.

"I think this project is really terrific, and it will eventually fill. But I'm scared for the fact that they need a lot of new people," says Bev Coggins, a local real estate agent who has sold homes in the Arkansas River Valley for 32 years. "I think it will take a while. Maybe 10 or 15 years. But I think people will come. Once we have something really nice here, they will come."

Local real estate agent Bill Dobson, who is helping to sell the Selbys' property, said the project is garnering interest among locals eager to chat over the porch railing instead of tossing waves to neighbors over the steering wheel.

"This has more local appeal than any project we've seen in this valley," Dobson said.

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South Main River Park proposal in Buena Vista

Land development

Acres: 40

Homes: 315, including 126 residences that are combined with retail and office use

Price per lot: \$38,000 to \$250,000

Parks/open space: 10 acres

Water park on Arkansas River

Length: Three-quarters of a mile

Whitewater features: Six surfing waves and holes, dozens of eddies, hundreds of boulders

Cost: \$1 million, including \$622,000 for Phase 1

Amenities: Two trails, a pedestrian bridge, terracing along the banks for spectators, fishing areas

