

We should preserve our western skyline

HOLMES ROLSTON
For The Coloradoan

Horsetooth Mountain should be preserved as the most distinctive of the foothills peaks between Denver and Wyoming. In the Fort Collins area, it forms our western skyline, framing a skein of geese or a wintry sunset, to add a touch of the wild to our routine town. The logo of the city is the peak with the geese aloft in the foreground, chosen because we have all delighted in a scene distinctive to our home. One of the principles in environmental ethics is that one should particularly preserve a landmark that has become a cultural symbol.

As scenic vista, the park would be enjoyed daily by tens of thousands of persons. Developers do not move mountains, of course, but they can greatly disfigure them. If roads and homesites are bulldozed into its sides, the wild and unspoiled effect will be lost. Our foothills mountains are fragile, easily scarred, and slow to heal, as a glance toward the lower hogbacks will show. We can act now to preserve our skyline forever.

The mountain will be especially useful as a half day park. In 20 minutes, any of several trailheads can be reached, trails toward a splendid view back over town. You could take Cub Scouts there Saturday morning, when most of them have soccer that afternoon. You could ride horseback to Spring Creek Falls Sunday afternoon. The mountain can be hiked year round, when high country access is limited to skiers. With the escalating cost of gasoline, the sales tax loss will partly be regained in gas savings by having more trails close in. Arthur's Rock and Greyrock are the only similar trails now. Another rule in environmental ethics is that natural amenities are more valuable if they are close to an urban area, mixing the urban, rural, and wild.

The wildlife there includes deer, bobcat, fox, coyote, and the Abert's squirrel, occasionally even bear and mountain lions. A birdwatcher at dusk could tally three dozen species, including eagles, hawks, prairie falcons, swifts, ravens, swallows, wrens, evening grosbeaks, juncos, jays, chickadees, blue grouse, tanagers, woodpeckers, and great horned owls. The Horsetooth habitat is critical to preserving the wild turkey in our area.

On a spring flower walk you can find

Pasqueflowers, shooting stars, bluebells, spring beauties, thermopsis, sand lilies, Solomon's seal, blue clematis, sugarbowl, skullcap, Easter daisies, penstemons, whiskbroom, parsley, salt and pepper, lupines, wild rose, buttercups, violets, and wild plum and cherry. The unusual grass fern can be found in crevices on the vertical rock cliffs. If we keep this wildness public, rather than post it for private use, we can follow the principle in ethics that, where we can, we ought to maximize a nonconsumable good.

This way, everyone can use the mountain, and no one uses it up.

Fort Collins voters may be reluctant to foist this purchase off on the rest of our population centers. It offers all its assets, except as a scenic vista, to Loveland residents as well, who are only 10 minutes further away. They would gain a southern entrance to Lory State Park, whereas now they have to drive around the northern end of Horsetooth Reservoir.

Estes Park people form a special case. They stand to gain relatively little here, because they are already so richly blessed with public lands. Virtually to the last inhabitant, they have chosen to live where they can enjoy the National Park and Forest, maintained by taxpayers all across the nation. Business life in Estes prospers in proportion as they draw tourists whose main attraction is these public lands. The expensive Big Thompson highway has just been rebuilt (after the flood) with public funds.

Further, much of the Estes sales tax will come out of the pockets of tourists, whose purchases are not likely to be affected by the extra penny. In this sense, Estes is a town whose aesthetic and commercial life is massively subsidized by public lands. Fair-minded persons there will be willing for us (as they say) "down the valley" to have lesser, but similar benefits.

The cost will be a small tax, freely voted on ourselves for half a year to buy 2,005 acres at \$1,496 per acre. We remove this undeveloped land, taxed now at \$408 yearly, from taxable lands, a negligible cost. The property taxes on homes which might be built there will not really be lost, as such homes will be built elsewhere in the county foothills. Those taxes in any case could hardly cover the extra services demanded by such mountain homes.

Guest opinion

If the state assumes control, the county will have no further costs. State maintenance will be economized because of the already existing staff at Lory State Park.

The decision voters face is irreversible. Some say that this tax money could better be spent fixing roads and bridges or improving parks already held. But such projects are not likely to come on the ballot instead if this one fails. They are, moreover, postponable, at least for a time. The Horsetooth issue comes to the ballot, after lingering for years in hopes of state and federal funding, because those possibilities have entirely collapsed. The Reagan administration, desiring to force these decisions back to the local level, has frozen all land acquisition. Whether criticism should be leveled at a disappointing state legislature or at federal bureaucrats is not relevant. The Soderbergs have shown considerable patience, but now have no option but to sell, either to the county or to developers.

Once done, this is done forever. Another of the rules in environmental ethics is that one ought to give special thought to irreversible decisions. Mistakes made here are of the most serious kind.

The stakeholders on Tuesday, April 28, are not merely ourselves but future generations. Formerly a resident of Virginia and North Carolina, I recall the controversies in setting aside the Great Smokies and the Shenandoah National Parks. Decisions that were a tossup a generation and a half ago, no one now would dream of rescinding. We shall be voting whether this will be a park for our children's children. Our vote will stand for centuries. In this fourth fastest growing area in the nation, we need voters who love their present western skyline and who also can see a great distance ahead.

Continuing a theme from *The Coloradoan's* recent series on in-town parks, Horsetooth Mountain is the skyline of our future.

Holmes Rolston, III, is professor of philosophy at Colorado State University, where he teaches environmental ethics.