



BUILDING BRIDGES
 These whimsical bridges were installed in 2011.

SOLD

Jewels of the Rockies

Hinsdale County acquires two picturesque islands on Colorado's **LAKE SAN CRISTOBAL.**

BY CARY ESTES

There are plenty of spectacular views to take in as you make your way along Colorado's Silver Thread Scenic Byway. The snow-capped peaks of the towering San Juan Mountains. The occasional moose or elk foraging by the side of the road. The two islands on the big lake connected by a lighted Golden Gate-style suspension bridge?

That's right. After more than a century in private hands, one of the most striking visuals in scenery-soaked Southwestern Colorado is now open to the public. Last December, Hinsdale County acquired a 10.33-acre peninsula on Lake San Cristobal that includes two tiny islands for \$1.495 million.

After Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) provided \$1.3 million to the purchase price, it took a local fundraising campaign barely a month to cover the difference. CONTINUED ON PAGE 158



BULL'S EYE

The two islands and adjacent peninsula include 10.33 acres in the very heart of Lake San Cristobal.

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The Trust for Public Land (TPL) assisted in the acquisition, and M4 Ranch Group brokered the transaction.

“We’ve eyed this property for a long time,” says Kristie Borchers, chair of the Hinsdale County Board of County Commissioners. “We’ve seen the peninsula as the key for us to impact how our lake looks and feels for recreational usage. Getting it for the county has been talked about as a dream for as long as I can remember.”

With a population of fewer than 900 and roughly 0.75 inhabitants per square mile, Hinsdale County is one of the least populated areas in the Lower 48. In the middle of this wide-open space sits Lake San Cristobal, a 2.1-mile-long jewel with a depth of 90 feet. With a total of 11,000-acre-feet of water, San Cristobal is the second-largest lake in Colorado.

“It’s a gorgeous, one-of-a-kind piece of property. I defy somebody to find another place with more magic,” says Dan Murphy, who co-owns M4 Ranch Group with his brother, Michael.

The property has long been an island of a different sort in Hinsdale, private land in a county that is 96 percent publicly owned. It sat as an unused mining claim for decades, then went

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through a series of owners. The most recent, Brad Griffith, added the suspension bridges connecting the islands in 2011. He even considered building a home on the water.

After a conversation last year with Borchers and the Murphy brothers, Griffith indicated he was open to the possibility of selling the property to the county. That’s how TPL became involved.

“This property really jumped out to us,” says Patrick Gardner, Colorado and Southwest project manager for TPL. “Just to have an island that is open to public access in Colorado is pretty rare. And most lakes that are high up in the mountains like that are not easy to get to, but this one is. We felt like it needed to be in public ownership and open to everybody.”

Gardner says TPL entered into a purchase agreement to buy the land at the appraised value, then they were able to secure the grant from GOCO, which uses funds generated by the Colorado State Lottery for land conservation in the Centennial State. The remainder of the purchase price came through a fundraising campaign by the Friends of Lake San Cristobal. In short order, the group received 167 individual donations totaling \$218,000. CONTINUED ON PAGE 156



PRIVATE INHOLDING
Some 96 percent of
Hinsdale County
is publicly owned.

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The entire process, from initial conversation to closing, took barely four months, which Borchers says, “is completely outrageous.”

The new acquisition will be used to enhance tourism in Hinsdale County, both by offering better lake access for outdoor recreation, and through the unusual attraction provided by the scenic islands and bridges. The view is especially alluring at night when the bridges are dimly lit by 7-watt LED bulbs, casting a ghostly outline for those driving around the lake.

“Hinsdale County is this scrappy community that is reliant upon tourism, and this is an opportunity to enhance their economy with another asset,” says GOCO Executive Director Chris Castilian. “It’s an incredible piece of land that is hugely valuable to the community.”

Plans for the property include the creation of an ADA-accessible fishing pier, along with a launch area suitable for kayaks, canoes, and paddle boats. There is even talk of building a small amphitheater and possibly a marina.

“Our mission is to create greater access to the outdoors for all, and this was a property we felt strongly about,” Gardner says when describing GOCO. “It’s important to the local community

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HINSDALE COUNTY
COMMISSIONER

and tourism because it will provide a much-needed point of access to the water.”

The deal was finalized on December 22, giving Hinsdale County an early Christmas present. It was a celebration that literally hit home for the Murphy brothers.

“We work all over the Mountain West, but we live in Lake City. This is our home,” Dan Murphy says. “The highest and best use for this property isn’t as a trophy home. It’s as an opportunity for this small community to have a chance to attract more tourists.”

“We could live anywhere in the state, but we choose to live here,” Michael Murphy notes. “That says a lot about how important this project was to us.”

It was important to Borchers as well, enabling her to close out what obviously had been a challenging year with a rare reason to smile.

“Lake San Cristobal was an amazing project to have been a part of because we had all these partners coming to the table and figuring out what that common vision was and then working together to achieve that vision,” Borchers says. “It was so nice to have worked on a hopeful project in the year 2020.” 🇺🇸