

Aspen, Colorado: Devil or Guardian Angel?

By David Frey, 1-02-08

Where do I look for the soul of Aspen? Among the snowboarders chowing greasy sandwiches at Johnnie McGuire's deli? In Gucci, where handbags sell for thousands? At the foot of Aspen Mountain, where fans ring cowbells to cheer women's World Cup racers?

Other resorts worry about driving out the workforce. Aspen drove away workers so long ago, those towns have driven them away even farther. Eighteen miles to Basalt. Thirty to Carbondale. Eighty to Rifle.

"The true realization was when I actually started looking for a house in 2000," says Brian Keleher, Aspen High class of '87, part of a generation of Aspenites who couldn't afford their hometown. Now he's my neighbor in Carbondale, a speed-restricted Realtor.

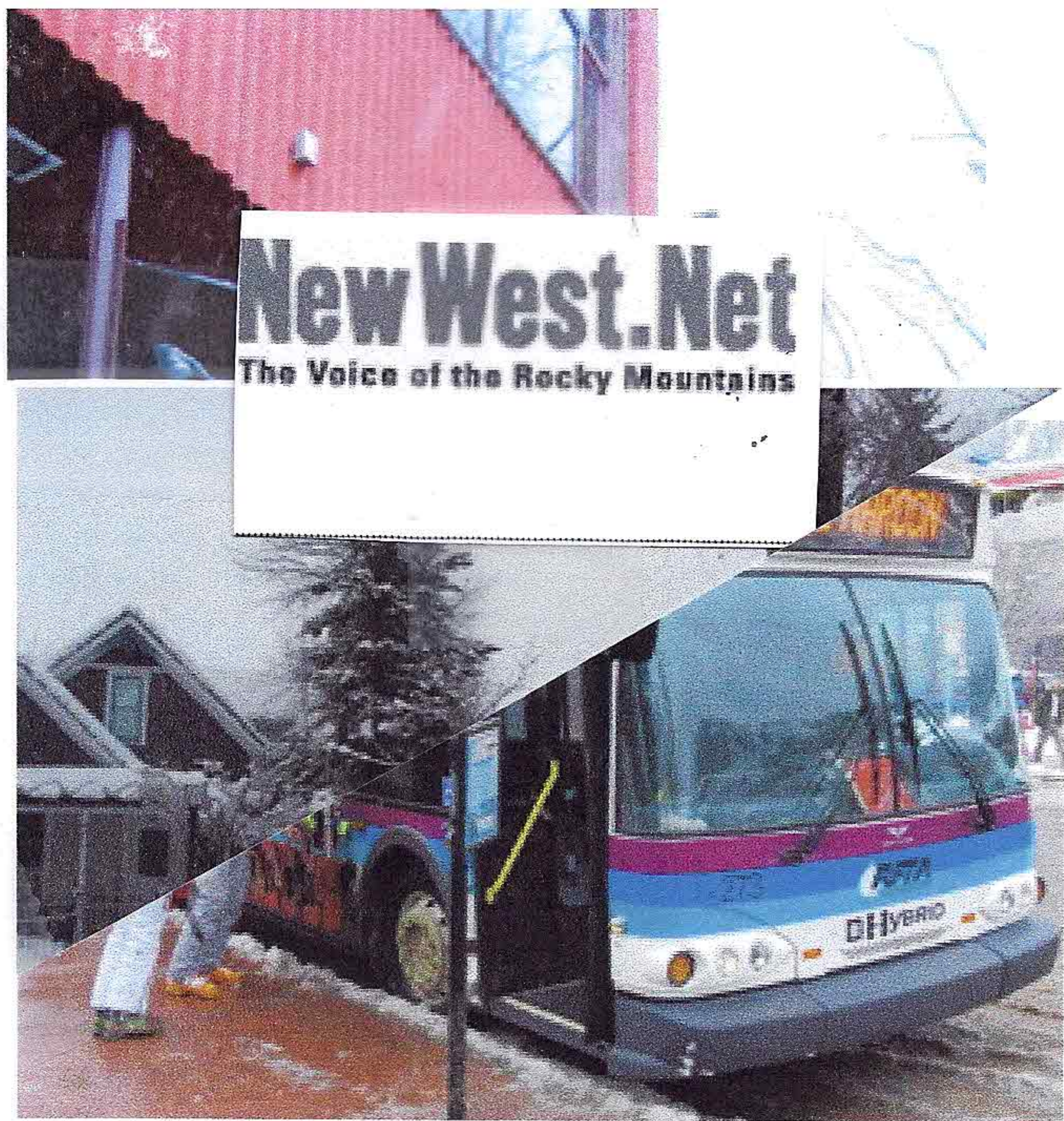
"My wife and I bought a guest house for \$36.5 million. Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal AlJaber bought a princely sum for a guest house in Aspen. A sizeable sum for a guest house in Aspen.

Aspen's bad rap comes only partly from its cost of living, though. The rest comes from heavy regulations that cause more than just independent Westerners to bristle. Aspen and Pitkin County have one of the most robust affordable housing programs in the country. Started back in 1974, it houses 60 percent of the city's workforce in 2,600 rental and for-sale units. The town recently forked over \$18 million to buy a lumberyard for 100 more units. Hundreds more are in the works.

Pitkin County has strictly limited backcountry development. A complicated set of transferable development rights discourages sprawl and limits the size of the castles Aspen became famous for. An ambitious bus system runs all the way to Rifle. Historic preservation ordinances protect architectural gems. First-floor offices are banned downtown to spur

Ireland is the poster boy, and sometimes the whipping boy, for Aspen's heavy hand. Before becoming mayor, he was a long-serving Pitkin County commissioner with a working-class hero reputation, a dishwasher-turned-bus-driver-turned-journalist-turned-lawyer who bike commutes from his deed-restricted home.

"You have to intervene to take care of yourselves," Ireland insists. "You've gotta at least understand, if you don't intervene you've gotta accept the consequences."



Skiers board a Roaring Fork Transportation Authority downtown. Buses shuttle commuters from as far away as Rifle, 80 miles from Aspen.

retail.

Even towns loathe to stand in the way of the free market have decided to adopt similar measures.

"(Everybody says) 'we don't want to do all these things that Aspen did,'" Ireland says, "but after a while everybody does what Aspen did, but they do it too late. Like Aspen did."

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