

RIVER VALLEY RANCH: Carbondale Business of the Year

A Ranch That Is Still Working - River Valley Ranch wins Carbondale's Business of the Year

By Amiee White Beazley
Aspen Daily News Special Sections Editor

River Valley Ranch transformed Carbondale. Today we all know River Valley Ranch as a fertile community lying on the banks of the Crystal River. But before it was the Roaring Fork Valley's 600-acre, \$400,000,000 model for a successful residential real estate development, it was an old working ranch owned by settler Myron Thompson. But in 1995, developer Gerald Hines of Houston-based Hines (part owner of Aspen Highland's base development), and Steve Crown of Crown Golf Properties in Chicago changed the face of Carbondale when they broke ground on River Valley Ranch.

"Carbondale isn't just a bedroom town for ski resort workers and ranchers anymore," says Chris Kelsey, the Hines Resorts' project manager for the 550-home golfing community. "It's a vibrant community in a stunning part of the Rockies with access to every kind of recreation you can imagine – both summer and winter. It's like Aspen used to be – inviting and almost affordable."

At a ceremony held in April, RVR was designated Carbondale's 2003 Business of the Year. According to the Carbondale Chamber of Commerce, "This award is given to a Chamber business member that best exemplifies quality products, exceptional customer satisfaction, overall good employee benefits, and employee recognitions for dedication and work ethics over and beyond expectations."

"RVR captured more than 40 percent of the home site market from Carbondale to Basalt for the second year in a row, including having its best home site sales year ever in 2002. RVR created 250 new homes of which more than 90 percent are occupied with fulltime residents who shop in local businesses. RVR subsidized 60 affordable housing units."

The range of real estate opportunities that RVR offers includes affordable housing neighborhoods, single-family homes, town homes and condominiums. Market-rate homes range in price from \$400,000 to \$1,950,000.

RVR was also active in preserving multiple historic structures such as the Old Thompson Barn and a cabin in Orchard Park that dates back to the 1880s and is considered the second oldest building in Carbondale. River Valley Ranch also donated more than \$150,000 to local charities including establishing the Carbondale Public Education Foundation

"River Valley Ranch is a strong influence in our community and our valley," notes the chamber in a recent newsletter, "providing community support, enhancing economic development, helping preserve historic buildings and promoting quality education. RVR is truly a benchmark to our business community."

As a business, there is no doubt RVR has been a success, but it has made an even stronger presence in the mid-valley community itself.

According to Kelsey, RVR has changed the community in "myriad of ways."

“River Valley Ranch geographically speaking close to doubles the size of the town,” says Kelsey. “The impact on Carbondale has very clearly widened the variety of housing options on both ends of the scale. The best part is, it is incredibly diverse. There is a wide array of people who work and play together. The other impact you see is a shift in the overall fabric of the business community, which is in part attributable to RVR. With the event of several new restaurants and art galleries opening and perhaps more vitality in Main Street -- town has done a great job following up on that.”

Many businesses have felt the impact of the RVR community. According to the chamber, RVR pumped an average of more than \$1 million per month into the local economy over the course of the past seven years.

One businessman who has experienced the “RVR effect” is Charlie Chacos, owner of the Village Smithy Restaurant on Main Street in Carbondale.

“I would say in the late '90s we were definitely seeing an increase (in customer traffic),” says Chacos. “In 1999 we did an expansion here and it was kind of along the lines that we are running out of room and we needed to get some people moving.”

And although Chacos does not live in RVR, he lives nearby and runs through the community two to three times per week.

“It is a beautiful setting,” he says. “They’ve done it really well. It is definitely an asset to the town.”

In the RVR development, there is a five-mile trail network, eight community parks, including a European-sized soccer field, a baseball field and a traditional kid’s playground, 250 acres of dedicated open space, and 1.5 miles of accessible fly fishing on the Crystal River.

The chamber notes: “RVR fulfilled all of its commitments to the Town of Carbondale including delivering multiple town parks, the Bald Eagle Conservation Area and almost five miles of hiking and biking trails. RVR has donated \$150,000 to local charities including establishing the Carbondale Public Education Foundation, as well as, routine donations of the use of the golf course and the Thompson Barn for charitable fundraising events. RVR established a .25 percent transfer tax that established and continues to fund the Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Foundation. RVR employs approximately 50 local people and has been awarded by Golf Magazine the "Top Ten You Can Play" recognition for the RVR golf course.”

Of course, there’s the course.

Celebrated golf course architect Jay Morrish designed the 18-hole championship golf course and driving range. Named “the new jewel of the Rockies” by Golf Magazine in 1999, and among the Best of America’s New Courses by The Golfer magazine, RVR’s golf course is the crown jewel of the development.

Other amenities include the Ranch House Swim and Tennis Club, with five Har Tru tennis courts, and outdoor swimming pool, a year-round lap pool and a children’s pool.

But for those who see RVR only as the community beyond the proverbial gate, Kelsey begs them to think again. In fact, aside from these amenities, which are covered in homeowner’s dues, “everything else at RVR is open to the public -- all the parks, hiking trails,” says Kelsey. “Triangle Park, the baseball and soccer fields -- RVR is hugely used by town residents that do not live in RVR.”

For Kelsey, and most residents of RVR, the best part of the community, is just that – the community.

“You see people, families with baby strollers walking the dog,” he says. “There is always some kind of participatory event in every season.”