El Rancho could have been saved but for false claims

GUEST COLUMN

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The coming demolition of El Rancho is a real loss.

We held a minority interest in the partnership that owned it, and we are principals of Observatory Holdings, the neighboring developer that offered to take the building in.

Having been inside the effort to save it, we think someone who was there ought to say plainly what happened – because how it came about has been so misrepresented that the community risks the wrong conclusion. Those misrepresentations defeated the one plan that would have saved it.

El Rancho was built for tourism, drawing travelers on Highway 40 for generations. As traffic shifted to I-70 it lost its visibility, and the local base never replaced what was lost; owners lost money, some a great deal. The Vincent family made the most substantial recent effort, rebuilding the shuttered restaurant from 2015 – only to enter bankruptcy in 2022, seven years and millions of dollars later.

At the bankruptcy auction, the two highest offers came from convenience-store chains that intended to demolish the building.

A third came from a partnership formed to save the restaurant, of which we were a part; without it, El Rancho would already be gone. We invested hundreds of thousands beyond the purchase price and brought in a proven Metro Denver restaurateur as a partner, yet it still lost more than $700,000 a year. Two rounds of management reached the same conclusion: the customer base no longer existed in the numbers a 22,000-square-foot restaurant needs.

The owners and brokers searched the Colorado market: restaurateurs, brewery operators, event groups. None would take it on. Meanwhile, a story circulated that a local group intended to buy and save El Rancho, though it never said who was behind the effort or how it would be financed.

Over many months, no one contacted us.

The only interested buyer was QuikTrip, which acquired the property in February 2025. From that point, there were two options: move the building, or tear it down. The campaign's strategy was to get QuikTrip to walk away – never realistic for a company that had spent millions on a site it had pursued for years.

A relocation plan did exist. The Observatory, underway across the road, offered a natural home, and QuikTrip agreed to a window in which the building could be moved rather than demolished.

A structural engineer, McNamara Salvia, and building-moving specialists Mammoth Movers confirmed the historic portion could be moved, and we spent substantially to prepare it. A local owner/ operator came forward to run the brewery and bar there, alongside their bike shop.

A move like this is costly, so relocation depended on forming a Metropolitan District – a financing tool created by the State of Colorado to support responsible development. It uses no public money, nor does it put a single public tax dollar at risk – though opposition rested largely on the inaccurate claim that it did.

A second claim, that an engineer had found El Rancho could not be moved, was also false: Parks & Recreation, sometimes cited as the source, has clarified it was told only that the building could not go six miles to its own site over rolling terrain.

In the fall of 2025, following an organized campaign by that same group, the Jefferson County Commissioners denied the Metro District.

And here is the fact that reframes everything else: At the public hearing, members of that group urged the Commissioners to reject the Metro District – without which the project could not fund El Rancho's preservation – when QuikTrip already owned the property and relocation was the only alternative to demolition.

To oppose the district then was to oppose the last path to preserving the building.

A group that spent months telling the community it was fighting to preserve El Rancho asked the County to reject the one plan under which it could survive. That record is hard to reconcile with a sincere preservation effort.

The campaign never offered to buy El Rancho, never presented an operator, never produced a preservation plan, and never asked to see the engineering we made available to anyone who requested it. What it did was oppose the private financing preservation depended on, using claims that were not accurate.

That approval will soon be before the Commissioners again, and it deserves a fuller explanation than it has received.

A Metro District is a standard Colorado tool: a development finances its own public improvements and repays the cost over time from the taxes and fees it generates. The levy falls only on property inside the district – the businesses that locate there – not on existing residents, and never touches the County's general fund. The site has long been zoned commercial, where the County's plan says such development belongs.

If approved, it makes a designled gateway to the town possible – a project built to fit the place, not the denser, more utilitarian version the economics would otherwise force. That is what a yes vote enables and protects.

QuikTrip's window has closed and El Rancho cannot be saved, but it is not too late to build something worthy of the gateway to Evergreen.

El Rancho was not lost to a developer's indifference or a buyer's cruelty. It was lost because the plan that would have saved it was defeated by arguments not supported by the facts. The community is entitled to know that.

Jack and Sherry Buchanan are Colorado-based commercial real estate property owners. They held a minority interest in the partnership that owned El Rancho from 2022 until its sale in 2025, and are principals of Observatory Holdings, which pursued the relocation plan described above. More on El Rancho, Metro Districts, and the vision for the site is atwww.theobservatoryevergreen.com.

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