

Explore

Big Sky

TOP STORIES OF





OUTLAW PARTNERS PHOTOS

Yellowstone Club pond spill: 30 million gallons of treated effluent enter the Gallatin watershed

On March 3, effluent from a failed pipe leading from a wastewater pond located in the Yellowstone Club began cascading into Second Yellow Mule Creek, a tributary of the Gallatin River.

From Second Yellow Mule Creek, the effluent continued into the South Fork of the West Fork before joining the main stem of the Gallatin. The flow stopped four days later, after nearly 30 million gallons of treated wastewater entered the watershed, turning the Gallatin a milky brown.

The majority of the treated effluent had been piped up to the pond from the Big Sky Water and Sewer District treatment plant, where it joined water treated at the Yellowstone Club’s sewer plant.

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality sent specialists to test water quality, determine if there was a public health threat, and examine design flaws leading to the spill.

Water quality standards for the unpermitted discharge were exceeded for ammonia and turbidity, a metric for measuring suspended sediment in the water, which negatively affects fish. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks officials attributed the death of five westslope cutthroat to the spill and noted that long-term impacts might take years to discern.

The Yellowstone Club repaired the pond and introduced new elements to its design to prevent a future failure. The new pond was approved and operational within two months and slope reclamation to minimize erosion will continue into 2017. The Department of Environmental Quality is still working on penalty calculations to be levied against the Yellowstone Club for the spill.

As a result of the spill, the Big Sky Water and Sewer Board reexamined its wastewater storage and disposal agreement with the Yellowstone Club. The spill also played a role in the reinvigoration of a community forum designed to address the intersection of development and water issues in Big Sky.

Big Sky: 2025

Resort plans \$150 million investment over next decade

BIG SKY – Big Sky Resort announced Aug. 24 a \$150 million investment in a 10-year vision for future improvements to create a European-style ski resort experience.

The plan includes 12 new or upgraded chairlifts—including eight bubble-enclosed lifts, a gondola originating at the Mountain Village and a lift on the south face—night skiing on Andesite Mountain, 10 new restaurants, as well as extensive renovations and construction in the Mountain Village.

“This is about making Big Sky not just bigger but making it better,” said Stephen Kircher at the Aug 24 press conference. Kircher is the president of Boyne Resorts’ eastern operation and his father Everett purchased Big Sky Resort in 1976, three years after it opened.

“We believe we have a unique positioning statement that ultimately we’ll roll out in the next decade where we become the American Alps,” he said. A new lift at the base of the Moonlight terrain is planned, creating the longest lift-served vertical drop in the U.S. at more than 4,500 feet.

Kircher laid out the investment in near-, mid- and long-term phases, and many of the near-term projects have been completed or are under construction, including two new Doppelmayr lifts that replaced the Lone Peak Triple and Challenger chairlifts for the 2016-2017 season.

Additional lift upgrades envisioned include Six Shooter, Ramcharger, Shedhorn, Iron Horse, Lone Moose, Swift Current, Thunder Wolf and a Lone Peak Tram capacity upgrade. New lifts would include a North Village Gondola, additional lifts in the Moonlight area and a chairlift that would access the south-face terrain that the tram services now.

This capital investment will help accommodate an anticipated 650,000 annual visitors by 2025, and give Big Sky Resort international appeal. Employee housing, additional non-stop flights to Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport and expanded summer offerings—including more mountain biking trails, mountain coasters and high alpine ziplines—are also built into the plan.

Kircher said this is part of \$1 billion he expects to be invested in the next decade in the Big Sky community, by the resorts, developers and other business interests.



The new six-place Powder Seeker chairlift at Big Sky Resort is one of the most technologically advanced lifts in North America. PHOTO BY CODY WHITMER

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BIG SKY, MONTANA

Yellowstone weathers biggest wildfire season since 1988

More acres burned in Yellowstone National Park in 2016 than any year since 1988. By the time season-ending precipitation fell on the most persistent wildfires in the park boundaries, more than 62,000 acres, or almost 100 square miles, had burned. Many of those acres burned within fire scars from 1988, when over 1,200 square miles were scorched during an exceptionally dry and windy summer and fall.

High temperatures and strong winds in late August contributed to the growth of a handful of large fires, like the Maple Fire, which grew to more than 45,000 acres. Late July and August were warmer and drier than average—according to the Western Regional Climate Center, precipitation in the West Yellowstone area was between 25 and 70 percent of average for the month of August.

The Maple Fire, which came within three miles of West Yellowstone, triggered the most robust response, including a public meeting attended by 300-plus people. In late August, management of the Maple Fire was turned over to a Type 2 Incident Management Team that engaged in more aggressive suppression tactics.

Most of the 22 fires that started in 2016 season were caused by lightning and didn’t grow larger than 1 acre. The majority of the fires started by lightning were monitored but unsuppressed so wildfire could play its natural role in the ecosystem.

Although park roads and facilities were by and large unimpacted by the wildfires, several trails were closed for much of the summer, strict fire restrictions were put in place during peak visitation times, and a low haze of smoke hung over West Yellowstone for much of August and September.



The 45,250-acre Maple Fire, shown on Sept. 10, was the largest fire in Yellowstone this summer in terms of total acres consumed. NPS PHOTO



CC PHOTO

Zinke appointed Trump’s interior secretary

Montana Rep. Ryan Zinke won a decisive victory over Democratic challenger Denise Juneau in the November election to earn his second term as Montana’s sole representative in the U.S. House. However, before the year was out, he accepted a position in President-elect Donald J. Trump’s cabinet as secretary of the Department of the Interior.

If confirmed by the Senate, the retired Navy SEAL will be the first interior secretary from Montana. Many political pundits view Zinke’s confirmation as a potential win for Democrats in the 2018 midterm elections, when he was likely to challenge Sen. Jon Tester and try to flip the seat for Republicans.

Like Trump, Zinke has publically denounced Republican proposals to transfer federal lands to the states, but environmentalists didn’t sing his praises in concert when the news was announced. Zinke is a vocal supporter of Montana’s coal industry and fossil fuel extraction on public lands.

And on Jan. 3, 2017, Zinke voted in favor of a Congressional rules package that contains a provision allowing public land transfers to be considered “budget neutral,” making it easier for the government to transfer federal lands to the states.

“[Zinke] has built one of the strongest track records on championing regulatory relief, forest management, responsible energy development and public land issues,” Trump said in a Dec. 15 statement. “As a former Navy SEAL, he has incredible leadership skills and an attitude of doing whatever it takes to win. America is the most beautiful country in the world, and he is going to help keep it that way with smart management of our federal lands.”

It was not clear as of EBS press time, on Jan.4, when Zinke will vacate his U.S. House seat. But when he does, as reported by the Associated Press, Democratic Gov. Steve Bullock will need to call a special election for voters to choose a replacement to serve out Zinke’s two-year term.

Housing continues to plague businesses, workforce in Big Sky

On June 20, the Big Sky Resort Area Tax Board appropriated \$1.05 million of a \$1.2 million request from the Big Sky Housing Trust to address affordable housing in this resort community.

Big Sky Resort completed in the late fall a renovation of the Black Bear Bar and Grill, adding 44 beds to its employee housing. The Yellowstone Club this winter is renting out 60 percent of 320 Ranch’s cabins to house some of its employees.

All of this points to an issue that just won’t go away in Big Sky—there aren’t enough beds for everyone that wants to work, play and live here.

Brenda Godoy, co-owner of Alberto’s Mexican restaurant in Town Center, told EBS she faced staffing challenges during one of the busiest summers she’s seen in 10 years in Big Sky.

Exhausted after an especially busy Big Sky PBR weekend, Brenda and her husband Alberto closed the restaurant for four days, concluding that the only option was to stop lunch service and focus solely on dinner. Blue Moon Bakery and Chopper’s Grub and Pub, among others, also curtailed their hours of operation claiming the same staffing shortages.

The Bugaboo Café shut down for approximately one month this summer, and owner Geoff Calef pointed to housing as his main challenge in finding dependable employees.

The Big Sky Chamber of Commerce and the Human Resource Development Council announced March 23 the formation of the Big Sky Community Housing Trust. Local businessman Loren Bough provided an initial land donation of 10 acres in the South Fork neighborhood to build housing for year-round workers in the community.

“[Since] Big Sky is unincorporated, the tools that other resort communities use to build and maintain affordable housing are not available, but it doesn’t mean it’s impossible,” HRDC Community Development Manager Brian Guyer told EBS at the time.

“We here in Big Sky see workforce housing as the biggest hurdle to economic growth,” said BSRAD board member Kevin Germain, during a Dec. 12 conference call with six other resort tax communities or areas. He added that a 2014 affordable housing study showed 83 percent of Big Sky’s workforce commutes from elsewhere.

BSRAD has again employed lawyer Mona Jamison to lobby for a bill in the Montana Legislature enabling communities to raise their resort tax from 3 to 4 percent, and earmark that additional 1 percent for specific projects like affordable housing. A similar bill failed in a 25-25 tie in the Senate during the 2015 legislative session.



2016 YEAR OF EVENTS

Jan. 10 - English pop icon David Bowie dies

Jan. 28 - The World Health Organization announces an outbreak of the Zika virus

JANUARY

Feb. 12 - Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill sign an Ecumenical Declaration in the first meeting between leaders of the Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches since their split in 1054

FEBRUARY

March 6 - Former First Lady Nancy Reagan dies

March 22 - Three coordinated bombings, claimed to be executed by ISIS, kill 32 and injure 250 in Brussels, Belgium

MARCH

April 21 - Famous singer and pop icon Prince dies

APRIL

May 28 - The Cincinnati Zoo kills Harambe, a 17-year-old, 400 pound gorilla after a child slips into the animal's enclosure

MAY

June 1 - The Gotthard Base Tunnel, located in Switzerland, opens and is the world's longest and deepest railway tunnel

June 3 - Famous American boxer Muhammad Ali dies

June 12 - Omar Mateen opens fire inside Pulse, a gay nightclub, in Orlando and kills 49 people

June 23 - The United Kingdom votes in a referendum to leave the European Union

JUNE



OUTLAW PARTNERS PHOTO

Parasite results in massive fish kill, weeks-long closure of Yellowstone River

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks on Aug. 19 closed 183 miles of the Yellowstone River and its tributaries to all recreational activities in response to a fish kill unprecedented in the state.

FWP enacted the closure to lessen recreational stressors and reduce the spread of a parasite that killed an estimated tens of thousands of mountain whitefish as well as dozens of trout. The full closure remained in effect for 13 days, dealing a substantial blow to the largely tourism-based economy of Livingston and prompting Gov. Steve Bullock to declare a state of emergency due to an aquatic invasive species.

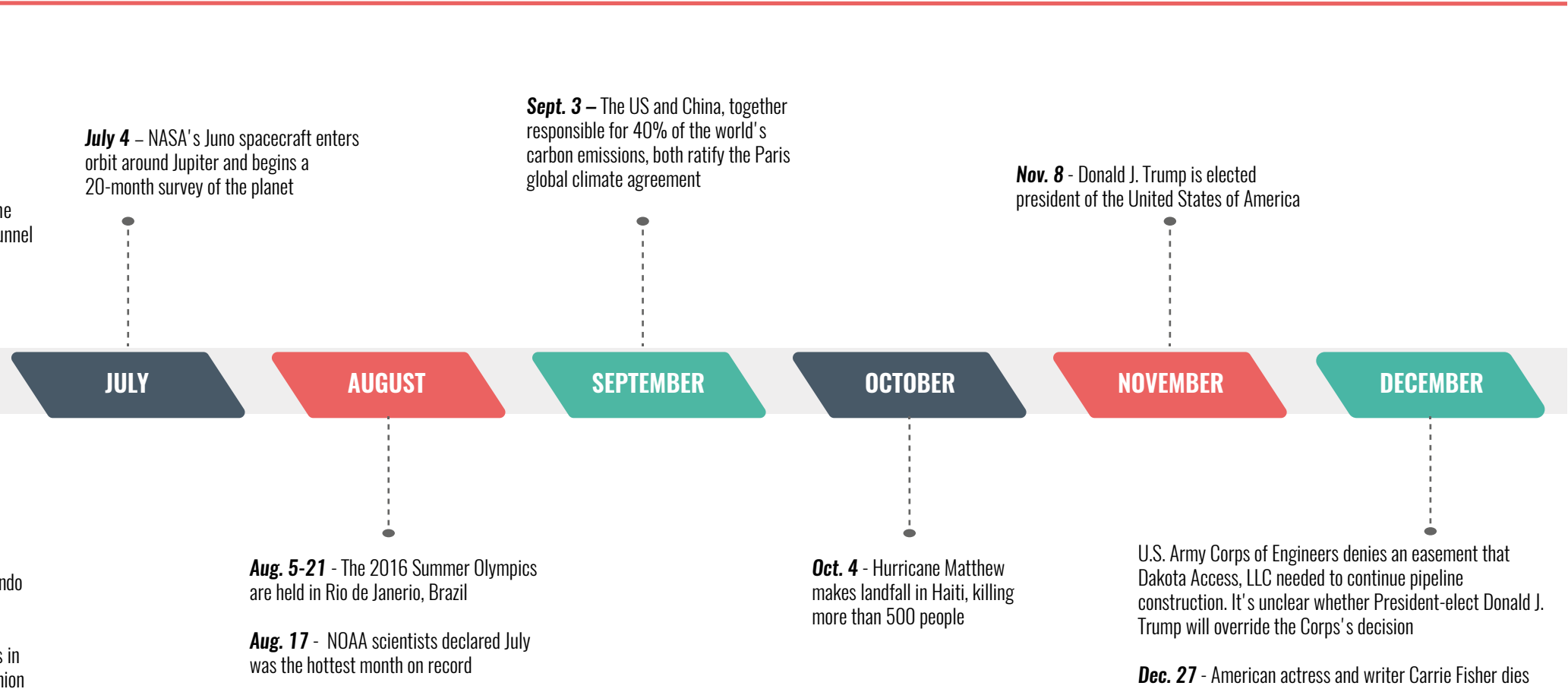
The governor’s declaration was enacted on Aug. 29 to ease the financial burden of the closure by freeing up Montana Department of Commerce grants and helping businesses recoup lost income from their insurance policies. A study by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research at the University of Montana estimates those economic losses totaled \$360,000 to \$524,000 in an area that draws its lifeblood from the Yellowstone.

The governor’s declaration likely stemmed in part from a packed, and at times heated, public meeting hosted in Livingston by FWP on Aug. 24.

During that meeting, FWP spokesperson Andrea Jones emphasized to a crowd of approximately 400 that the summer of 2016 was unusually hard on fish. Daytime high water temperatures frequently reached 70 degrees on the Yellowstone in August—well above the ideal temperature for trout and whitefish. Jones said the Yellowstone was running just 280 cubic feet per second above its all-time low from records dating back 120 years.

Those conditions made whitefish highly susceptible to infection by a parasite named *Tetrascapula bryosalmonae* that causes proliferative kidney disease with often-fatal consequences.

Sections of the river upstream and downstream of the hardest-hit area near Emigrant opened on Sept. 1, followed by a complete lifting of the closure on Sept. 23.



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Big Sky traffic at boiling point

In the Dec. 23, 2015, issue of EBS we ran a feature story titled “Boiling point: Big Sky traffic ‘a concern for community’”—it appeared in the same issue as our Top Stories of 2015 special section—and in 2016 the area’s traffic issues showed no signs of simmering.

On Jan. 19, a westbound vehicle was stopped at the entrance to Roxy’s Market on Lone Mountain Trail when a van rear-ended the car, sending it into oncoming traffic. The three-vehicle accident resulted in minor injuries to two of the drivers who were treated at the Big Sky Medical Center.

Big Sky Fire Department Chief William Farhat pointed to a lack of turn lanes on the highway. “If there was a middle lane, [the driver] would have been able to [turn safely],” Farhat said at the time.

The Big Sky Chamber of Commerce and Western Transportation Institute held three public meetings in January and February, collectively attended by more than 100 people, to address transportation issues in the area.

Big Sky taxpayers are paying nearly \$540,000 in road taxes to Gallatin County and \$700,000-plus to Madison County, according to Western Transportation Institute’s David Kack. None of that money sent to Gallatin County—and very little of the Madison County revenue—is being reinvested in road construction or maintenance in Big Sky, he said in January.

Former Big Sky Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Clemens added that traffic in Gallatin Canyon and Lone Mountain Trail is at “carrying capacity right now,” and if Big Sky doesn’t have safe, dependable roads, community businesses could see a negative effect on the number of customers from Bozeman and elsewhere in Gallatin County.

Based on these community meetings, in early spring Kack released a study outlining residents’ concerns. These included turn lanes, sight lines, speed limits, pedestrian crossings, wildlife crossings, cell phone distraction zones, traffic, proper signage and funding, among many other issues. The report suggested an immediate speed and safety study, as well as a full transportation study of the Big Sky area.

In July, the Big Sky Community Organization announced the Montana Department of Transportation determined the intersection of Lone Mountain Trail and Ousel Falls Road has met criteria for the installation of a traffic control signal. BSCO will take the lead on the traffic signal project at this busy intersection in 2017.



OUTLAW PARTNERS PHOTO



National Park Service Director Jonathon Jarvis, who retired from his post on Jan. 3, 2017, after celebrating the agency’s 100th birthday. NPS PHOTO

National Park Service celebrates its 100th birthday in Gardiner

Yellowstone posts record visitation numbers

The National Park Service celebrated its centennial at the doorstep of the world’s first national park on Aug. 25 to celebrate what writer and historian Wallace Stegner deemed America’s “best idea.”

The program, which included remarks by a handful of heavy-hitters in public land management agencies and national park conservation organizations, was attended by an estimated 6,000 people. Music from Emmylou Harris and John Prine and a dynamic impersonation of Teddy Roosevelt brought levity to the evening’s events.

The 51st U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell celebrated America’s newest addition to the national park system—the Katahdin Woods and Water National Monument in Maine, which was designated by President Barack Obama on the eve of the centennial—and embraced a message of inclusiveness.

“All Americans—no matter where they come from, how they worship or who they love—should see themselves in these public lands,” Jewell said, bringing to mind a NPS initiative called “Find Your Park.” Jewell said national parks across the country were experiencing record visitation at the time.

In a press conference before the formal program, Park Service Director Jonathan Jarvis addressed some of the challenges facing the NPS. Jarvis said the park system is “chronically underfunded” and private dollars are necessary for the park service to fulfill its mission.

That message—become accustomed to private and commercial funding in the national park system—was echoed in the public program by several speakers, including Jewell; Yellowstone Superintendant Dan Wenk; and Kay Yeager, the board chair of Yellowstone Forever.

As of Nov. 8 (the most current data available), Yellowstone National Park was on track to break the visitation record it set in 2015. During the first ten months of 2016, Yellowstone logged more than 4.2 million recreational visits, a 3.6 percent increase from the same period the previous year and a 21 percent increase from 2014.

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OUTLAW PARTNERS PHOTO

Voters approve building reserve levy for Big Sky’s growing school district

By mail-in ballot, Big Sky voters approved an \$830,000 building reserve fund levy to finish Ophir Elementary facilities last spring.

On May 4, the Gallatin County Election office released vote tallies. Fifty-five percent of voters in the district were in favor of funding the levy and 45 percent were opposed. Fifty-seven percent of eligible voters participated in the election.

A similar measure was put before Big Sky School District voters in March 2015. That measure was defeated, with 57 percent of voters opposed to it. Turnout was approximately 12 percent lower in the 2015 election.

“We’re really happy to make this next step forward in this school and really grateful to everyone who participated in the election,” said Big Sky School District Superintendent Dustin Shipman.

In May 2013, voters approved a \$10.2 million bond to fund the purchase of two lots and the construction of the Ophir Elementary School building. Problems with soil at the site led to at least \$800,000 in unanticipated construction expenses to shore up an unstable foundation. As a result, there was a budget shortfall and parts of the school—the library, gym, locker rooms, and outdoor landscaping as well as six rooms—remained unfinished.

“I think voters understand now that the school’s open that we built a quality school and really, the need was there,” said BSSD board chair Loren Bough, adding that the district probably saved about \$2.5 million by funding the measure now rather than waiting a couple years, when building expenses will likely increase.

Enrollment in the Big Sky School District is growing at a rapid clip: Bough said Big Sky has the fastest-growing school district in the state and enrollment increased by 10 percent leading into the 2015-2016 school year.



OUTLAW PARTNERS PHOTO

Big Sky’s ‘Main Street’ on the rise

In addition to the townhouses and condos springing up east of Ousel Falls Road, commercial construction during 2016 in Town Center is populating the vertical skyline of this resort hamlet.

Lone Mountain Land Company built the 19,000-square-foot building at 47 Town Center, and its butterfly-roofed neighboring structure at the corner of Lone Mountain Trail and Ousel Falls Road is set for completion in early summer 2017.

LMLC was formed in 2014 by CrossHarbor Capital Partners specifically for CrossHarbor’s development of Spanish Peaks Mountain Club and Moonlight Basin—CrossHarbor is also the principal owner of the Yellowstone Club.

Rotherham Construction is adding an addition to the Peaks Building, which is home to Beehive Basin Brewery, and should be finished in March. When the building is completed, the brewery will have additional basement storage and bathrooms, and two commercial spaces will open.

Big Sky’s The Lotus Pad will be one business finding a new home at 47 Town Center. The Asian restaurant is moving from its Westfork Plaza location into the larger space and is slated to open by Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Jan. 16, 2017.

The 10,000 feet of commercial space will also host The Tea & Spice Exchange, a national chain that also has a Bozeman location. Bozeman-based SAV Digital Environments will have a showroom and retail space. On the second and third floors are 16 residential apartments, including 14 two-bedroom units and two one-bedroom units.

Once construction is complete on the 38,000-square-foot 25 Town Center Ave building, the second floor will be headquarters to Lone Mountain Land Company and The Big Sky Real Estate Co., the luxury real estate company that LMLC formed earlier this year.

“We’re hoping that with the completion of the Town Center [buildings], ‘Main Street’ will really come together,” Dominick said. “It will start building that critical mass of people living there, shopping, [going to] restaurants that will really make Town Center a destination.”

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