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Group works to preserve Albion Basin's natural beauty

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When the snow at the top of Little Cottonwood Canyon finally melts this summer and thousands of Wasatch Front residents invade Albion Basin to camp, hike, watch birds and photograph wildflowers, few people will know why the area is largely undeveloped and no fee is charged to enjoy it.

Services such as shuttles, parking help, educational programs, research and land purchases are largely provided by a nonprofit group called Friends of Alta.

"As a resident who has lived up there since 1956, I feel pleased that we have been able to keep Albion Basin pretty much as it was when we came there," said Bill Levitt, owner of the Alta Lodge, a retired nine-term mayor of Alta, and one of the founders of Friends of Alta.

The approximately 900-member group with an annual budget of \$165,500 got its start in 1981 as Levitt and the town of Alta needed financial help to mount what turned into a successful legal challenge to stop a 400-unit timeshare from being built between Alta and Snowbird.

The developers promised to bankrupt the tiny town of Alta in the legal fight and actually won the first round in court. But some Alta Lodge guests suggested to Levitt's wife, Mimi - now the group's president - that people organize to raise money for a defense fund. Alta ultimately prevailed after a long court fight.

The group, which then called itself the Alta Defense Fund, formally incorporated in 1981. But the name was changed to Friends of Alta in 1985, in keeping with a broader mission that included acquiring private property in Albion Basin to preserve as open space.

The Levitts sold 8 acres they owned of the 600-acre basin to the U.S. Forest Service and, with the help of Salt Lake City, which holds the water rights, began to prohibit development by not selling water and by buying lots and conservation easements. According to Jen Clancy, the group's executive director, Friends of Alta has purchased 20 lots near the top of Little Cottonwood Canyon.

"Friends of Alta understands the value of open space, wildlife habitat and recreation in the basin," she said, adding that water from Little Cottonwood Canyon supplies about 20 percent of the needs of 400,000 Salt Lake County residents.

The group has branched into other areas, the most obvious being the summer booth it operates in conjunction with the town of Alta. Because of that effort, the U.S. Forest Service does not charge a fee to use the basin. Approximately 40,000 summer visitors to Albion Basin are greeted at the booth from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. seven days a week when the road is open. Workers provide brochures and information on wildflowers, tell visitors where parking is available, offer tips on where to hike, and stress the importance of protecting the watershed. A free shuttle program offered last year will continue.

Clancy also instigated some education and research programs. The group partnered with Alta, Westminster College and Utah State University on an eco-geographical study that has become a resource for education, research projects and planning. Scientists from the University of Wisconsin-Parkside have begun a wetlands and groundwater evaluation study.

The group works with teachers and students to teach natural history, social studies and biology to area teachers. It also teams with the Cottonwood Canyons Foundation, Alta Ski Lifts and the forest service to remove invasive weeds.

Bill Levitt said that, when he ran for mayor in 1970, he hoped Alta would remain as beautiful for his children and grandchildren as it was then.

"I talked to my grandkids and kids and they say we got it right," he said.

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