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City Parks Become Privatization Battlegrounds.

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — A new conservation battleground is emerging in crowded cities, where proposals to convert municipal parkland to other uses have provoked public furor.

Here at the base of the Rocky Mountains, a citizens group in August filed a suit to overturn a deal approved by the city in May to trade 190 acres of historic North Cheyenne Cañon Park to a private resort controlled by Denver billionaire Philip Anschutz. As part of the deal, the city gets access to land in more remote terrain.

"This should not become a theme park for the rich," Sue Spengler, a nearby resident, said as she surveyed a pine-fringed meadow in the park known as Strawberry Hill.

Officials of the The Broadmoor resort said the park is used by few people, and said the opposition was motivated by neighbors who largely want to keep Strawberry Hill for their own use, such as for walking dogs. "The group that is opposed to this is small in number but loud in voice," said Jack Damoli, president and chief executive officer.

Municipal parks have long faced threats from new roads and other infrastructure development, but conservationists say cities are under added pressure to sell or trade them because of population growth on limited land.

Of 54 cities responding to a survey earlier this year by the Trust for Public Land, a conservation advocacy group, 14, including Dallas, Phoenix and Detroit, reported they were facing the loss of parkland; 18 said they had lost a total of 688 acres over the past five years.

Officials of the Trust for Public Land said there has also been an increase in organized opposition to park transfers fueled by social media.

"In the past, you would have one park defender with one voice," said Adrian Benepe, former New York City parks commissioner and a director of Trust for Public Land. "Now because of the internet that defender potentially has a huge voice."

In Memphis, Tenn., a grass-roots movement sprang up in 2014 to oppose a decades-old practice of the city allowing the Memphis Zoo to use a stretch of grass in Overton Park as a parking lot.

The group organized protests over Facebook, including a standoff last March when some lovers of the 110-year-old park held their arms out to police to be arrested. In July, the city council voted to restrict parking there, prompting cheers from residents packed into the meeting.

In Tulsa, Okla., residents are trying to overturn a sale by a city public trust of nine acres of 67-acre Helmerich Park to a real-estate developer. That part of the park, on a bank of the Arkansas River, is slated for a shopping center and was sold by the Tulsa Public Facilities Authority trust for \$1.5 million in August last year.

Officials of the authority said that part of the park, which was first acquired in 1991, was never

developed for recreation. But former Mayor Terry Young and a group of other residents who filed suit in state district court in July 2015 to invalidate the deal said the park is held in trust for the public and can't be sold. The trust countersued in November, asking that a judge affirm its sale.

With the cases pending, opponents of the deal have held protest rallies and peppered local elected officials with emails and calls asking them to reconsider.

"Once you lose open space, you don't get it back," said Mr. Young, now 68.

The Colorado Springs issue started in 2014 when city officials approached The Broadmoor over gaining easements to use portions of the resort's 5,000-acre property to help connect a popular hiking trail that the resort bisects. The resort turned its attention to adjoining Strawberry Hill, after discovering the city might one day open it to downhill bicycle racing and disrupt the solitude for guests, said Mr. Damoli, the resort president.

"We want to keep the land as pristine as possible," he said.

The two sides agreed to a swap: Strawberry Hill for the resort, in exchange for access to about 500 acres of forest land for the city. The resort agreed to continue allowing public access on all but a nine-acre meadow of Strawberry Hill, where it plans to host barbecues and horseback riding for guests.

"It's an absolute no-brainer for the city of Colorado Springs," Mayor John Suthers said in an interview.

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Some conservationists support the exchange. "At the end of the day, we end up with more acres of park, open space and more miles of trail," said Susan Davies, executive director of Trails and Open Space Coalition, a local conservation group.

But some residents reacted with outrage when the city council approved the exchange, saying Strawberry Hill is part of a city park residents in 1885 voted to preserve.

"You're going to have the wealthy elite having lavish parties in the center, with the plebes looking in from the perimeter," said Dana Duggan, a media consultant who helped organize opposition to the deal.

Among other concerns by the residents is that much of the property being traded by the resort is far less accessible than Strawberry Hill.

"The bottom line is we get a bunch of junk and we trade a valuable piece of property," said Michael Chaussee, a local resident and real-estate investor.

City officials declined to comment on the litigation.

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