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State/Region

Strang faces tough test on Black Canyon park bill

By DON KNOX

Rocky Mountain News Aspen Bureau

In proposing that the pristine Black Canyon of the Gunnison River be the nation's newest national park, U.S. Rep. Mike Strang realized a politician's dream.

The Carbondale Republican won the support of business interests, which see the park attracting more tourists and more income to the Western Slope. He won praise from environmentalists, who hail what likely will be an increased effort to preserve the canyon's beauty.

Strang proposed the bill last year. It is being rewritten to satisfy local concerns but is expected to be introduced this session.

But his proposal likely will face a long, tough test on Capitol Hill, say the people who watch such legislation.

"I've seen park bills go through Congress that didn't have a chance, and I've seen some stall that everybody was backing," said Duncan Morrow, a National Park Service spokesman.

History figures in Strang's favor.

Most national parks win approval in election years, records show, and it's not lost on some observers that Strang is running for re-election in a district considered a stronghold for neither party.

Strang also benefits from the area's designation as a national monument, said Terri Martin, Rocky Mountain representative of the Washington-based National Parks and Conservation Association. The government owns the property, she said, so it doesn't face high land-acquisition costs.

Equally important is local support. If Strang achieves unanimous or near-unanimous support from Coloradans, Morrow said, his bill's chances will be better.

Strang appears to have such support. Environmental and business interests in Montrose and Grand Junction are lining up behind the proposal even as details are being worked out.

But the obstacles facing Strang's proposal on the Hill are formidable, Martin and others said.

A serious obstacle is concern by some members of the House subcommittee on national parks and recreation, likely the first

forum to hear Strang's proposal, that the canyon isn't expansive enough or diverse enough to be a national park.

"It's an amazingly scenic gorge, one of the most beautiful in the country," Martin said. "But most national parks have multiple features, multiple attractions. As the bill is written now, there's some concern that the park itself will have only one dominant feature."

Strang's proposal would combine the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, the Curecanti Recreation Area and 25 miles of the lower Gunnison Gorge into the Black Canyon National Park and Scenic Recreation Area. The complex would be six times the size of the 20,000-acre monument.

But only the monument would receive national park designation.

"If Mike Strang really wants to create a national park in his district, the natural choice would be Dinosaur National Monument," said Destry Jarvis of the National Parks and Conservation Association.

Dinosaur, in northwest Colorado on the Utah border, has more geographical and wildlife features inherent in a national park, Jarvis said.

Several bills to establish parks in other states also stand in the way of Strang's proposal.

A third possible obstacle is political, Martin said. The House



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U.S. Rep. Mike Strang's bill would combine Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, Curecanti Recreation Area and 25 miles of the lower Gunnison Gorge into Black Canyon National Park and Scenic Recreation Area.

subcommittee has a majority of Democrats, several of whom oppose Strang's environmental record.

"It's likely they'll see the Black Canyon as an environmental feather in Mike Strang's cap, a feather that he hasn't had before or maybe doesn't deserve," Martin said.

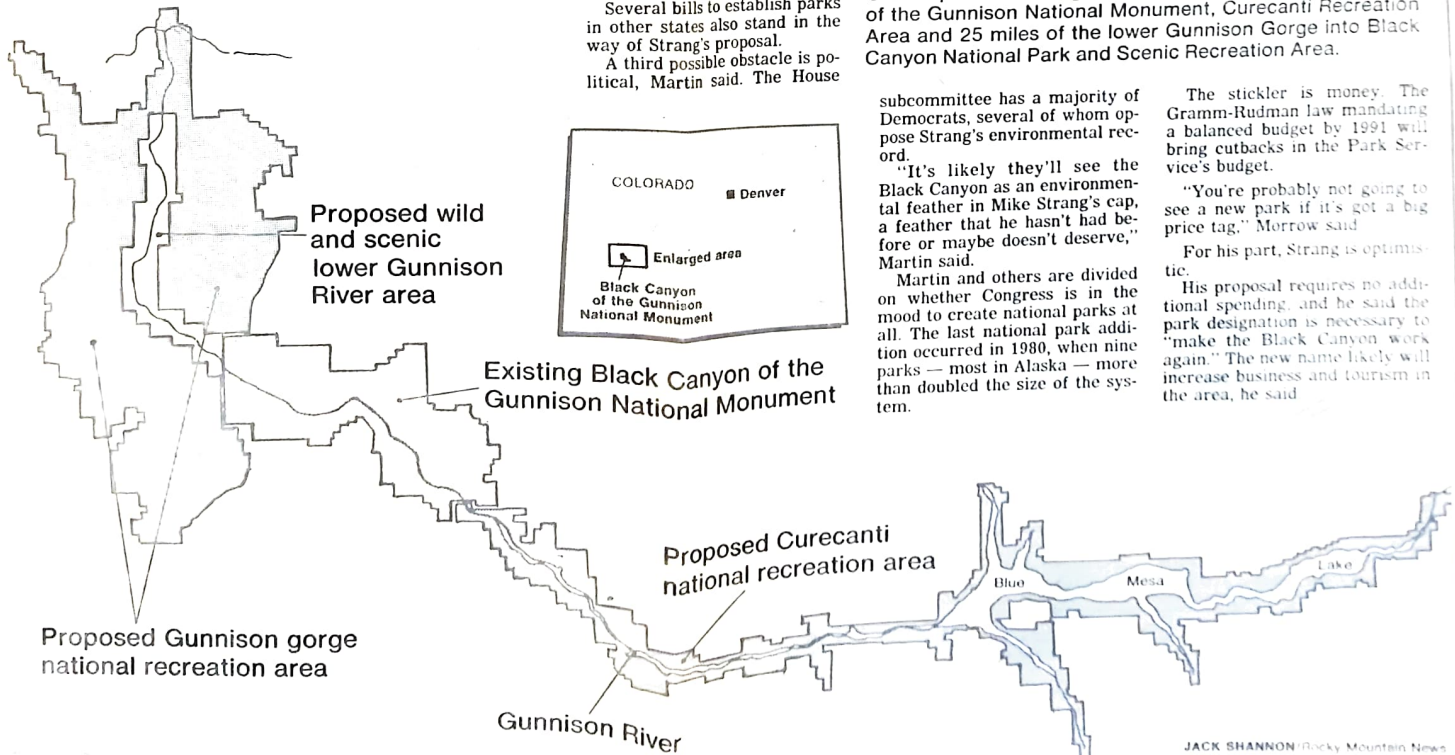
Martin and others are divided on whether Congress is in the mood to create national parks at all. The last national park addition occurred in 1980, when nine parks — most in Alaska — more than doubled the size of the system.

The stickler is money. The Gramm-Rudman law mandating a balanced budget by 1991 will bring cutbacks in the Park Service's budget.

"You're probably not going to see a new park if it's got a big price tag," Morrow said.

For his part, Strang is optimistic.

His proposal requires no additional spending, and he said the park designation is necessary to "make the Black Canyon work again." The new name likely will increase business and tourism in the area, he said.



JACK SHANNON/Rocky Mountain News