

Wine Country rarity: Vast southern Napa properties go on sale

Kathleen Pender

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Trees grow through the ruins of the old Napa Soda Springs resort north of Silverado Country Club. The 858-acre site is listed for \$50 million.

Photo: Kate Munsch / Special to The Chronicle

Two enormous properties under separate ownership in southern Napa County — one 858 acres and the other 950 — are for sale for the first time in more than 40 years. Although they're only 10 miles apart, each has a very different and fascinating backstory.

The “smaller” one, a few miles north of Silverado Country Club, contains only the ruins of Napa Soda Springs resort, which in the late 1800s had dozens of structures including a large rotunda hotel and ballroom with a 75-foot ceiling topped by a glass cupola and a mineral-water bottling plant.

The hilly terrain could support up to 150 acres of vineyards, said the seller’s agent, Gerry Rohm of Jones Lang LaSalle. And because it has been deemed a “landmark of special significance,” it potentially could be redeveloped as a resort, subject to environmental and other reviews, he said. Asking price: \$50 million.



Cormorants take off on Long Lake at Green Valley Ranch.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

The 950-acre Green Valley Ranch, lies to the southeast, extending into Solano County. It’s listed for \$25.5 million. What makes it unusual is its ownership structure and water resources, including three lakes.

It was purchased in 1978 by a group of people, mostly in their 20s and 30s, who formed a partnership (now a limited liability company) and bought the property for \$850,000. Of the 16 owners, 12 have been in it for the past 30 years.

“It’s not a commune, it’s not a condominium complex. It’s not co-housing. It’s its own thing,” said Bob Dickinson, one of the partners. Tom Ruge, another owner, said, “in many ways, it’s like a co-op.”

Other properties this large or bigger have sold in Napa County, but most are in “the more remote areas. We rarely see properties with the size and proximity to civilization” that Soda Springs and the ranch have, said Cyd Greer, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker Brokers of the Valley who is not one of the listing agents.

Both properties sustained damage in the 2017 Atlas Fire, but that’s not why their owners are selling, say their respective real estate agents. The Soda Springs owner is in his mid-80s and is selling “for estate planning purposes,” Rohm said.

The Green Valley Ranch owners are mostly in their 60s and 70s. “Some are aging out,” said listing agent Ginger Martin of Sotheby’s International Realty.

The group includes a doctor, a lawyer, an art dealer, two tech execs, a television producer, an epidemiologist, a former wallpaper company owner, and two retired “hairdressers to the stars,” Dickinson said.

Dickinson is an Emmy-winning television lighting designer. But in 1978, his career was just taking off, and coming up with \$18,000, his share of the down payment, “was a big hit for me. When you are in your 20s, you even finance your cars. You don’t have cash.”



Meadow House at Green Valley Ranch.
Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

By teaming up, “we got to live this lifestyle that is only entitled to the Rockefellers or the Pritzkers. All of us were professionals, but none of us had the money to buy a thousand acres with lakes.”

The ranch came with two historic homes that the owners use communally. After the purchase, 11 partners built five homes over the next few decades; some are suitable for multiple families, who use them according to a “very complex” legal structure, Dickinson said. “It wasn’t a lease but that’s the best way to view it.”

The group has kept expenses down by managing the property themselves. It also gets income from a 10-acre vineyard in the Solano County portion, and from a grazing deal with Five Dot Land and Cattle.

A few owners including Ruge live on the property, but most use it part time. “Almost every Saturday night for 40 years, someone cooks a big meal over at the ranch house and invites everyone to come on in potluck-style,” Dickinson said. “That became part of the fabric of it.” Naturally, there were disagreements, “but nothing catastrophic,” he

added.

Ruge compared it to “a big family. Some people you are close to, some are weird Uncle Harolds, some you are not that close to.” He added, “It has been a privilege to live here. It’s the best thing I ever did in my life.”



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Two years ago, Dickinson was in Southern California, watching helicopter footage of the Atlas Fire on TV when he saw the Craftsman-style home he built at the ranch in flames. The fire also destroyed the 1890s farmhouse.

At age 66, Dickinson said, he was “disinclined to rebuild.” But the sale of the ranch “was less to do with the fire and more to do with our all having grown old together,” he said. “The reality is, we can’t use the ranch and live the ranch like we did before.”

To sell the ranch, three-fourths of the partners had to agree. “A couple did not want to sell. That has been somewhat emotional for them,” Dickinson said. Children of owners who have been coming to the ranch since they were babies and are now in their 30s

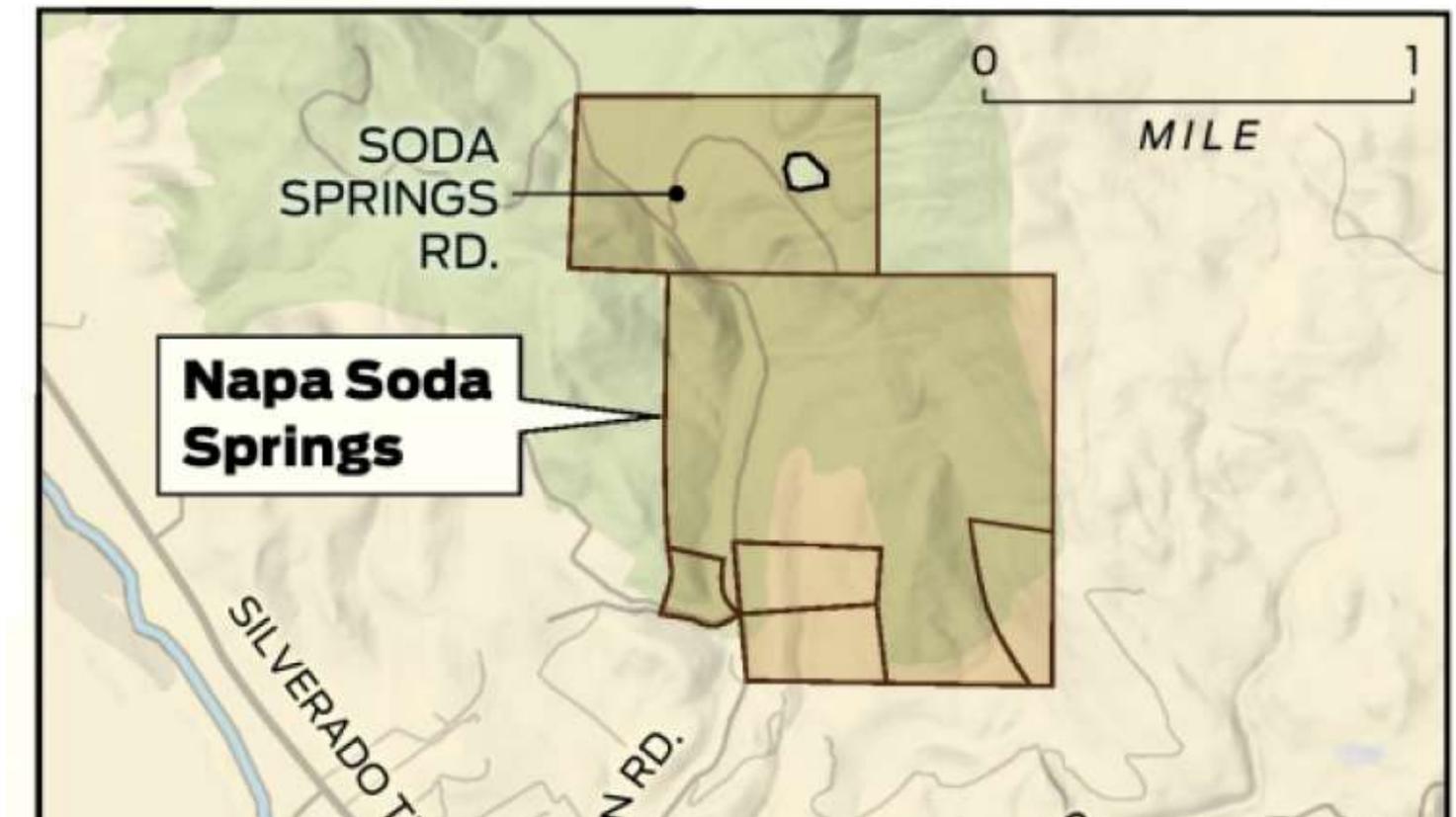
“are feeling melancholy the most.”

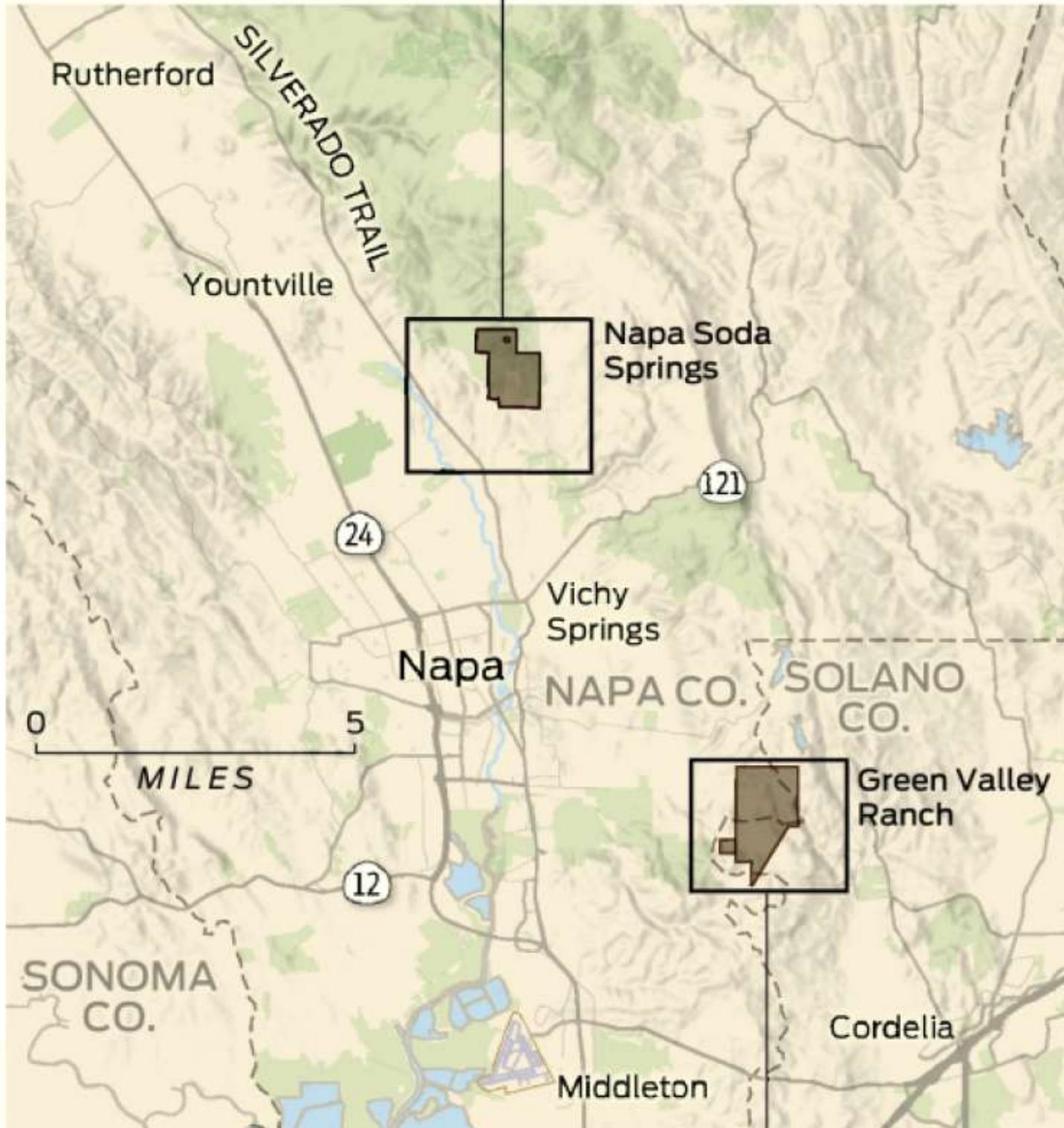
The property spans six legal parcels in Napa County and three in Solano County. Five could have additional homes. It enjoys some property tax breaks for agricultural land under the Williamson Act. No commercial farming including grapes is permitted on any Napa parcel, because of a conservation easement.

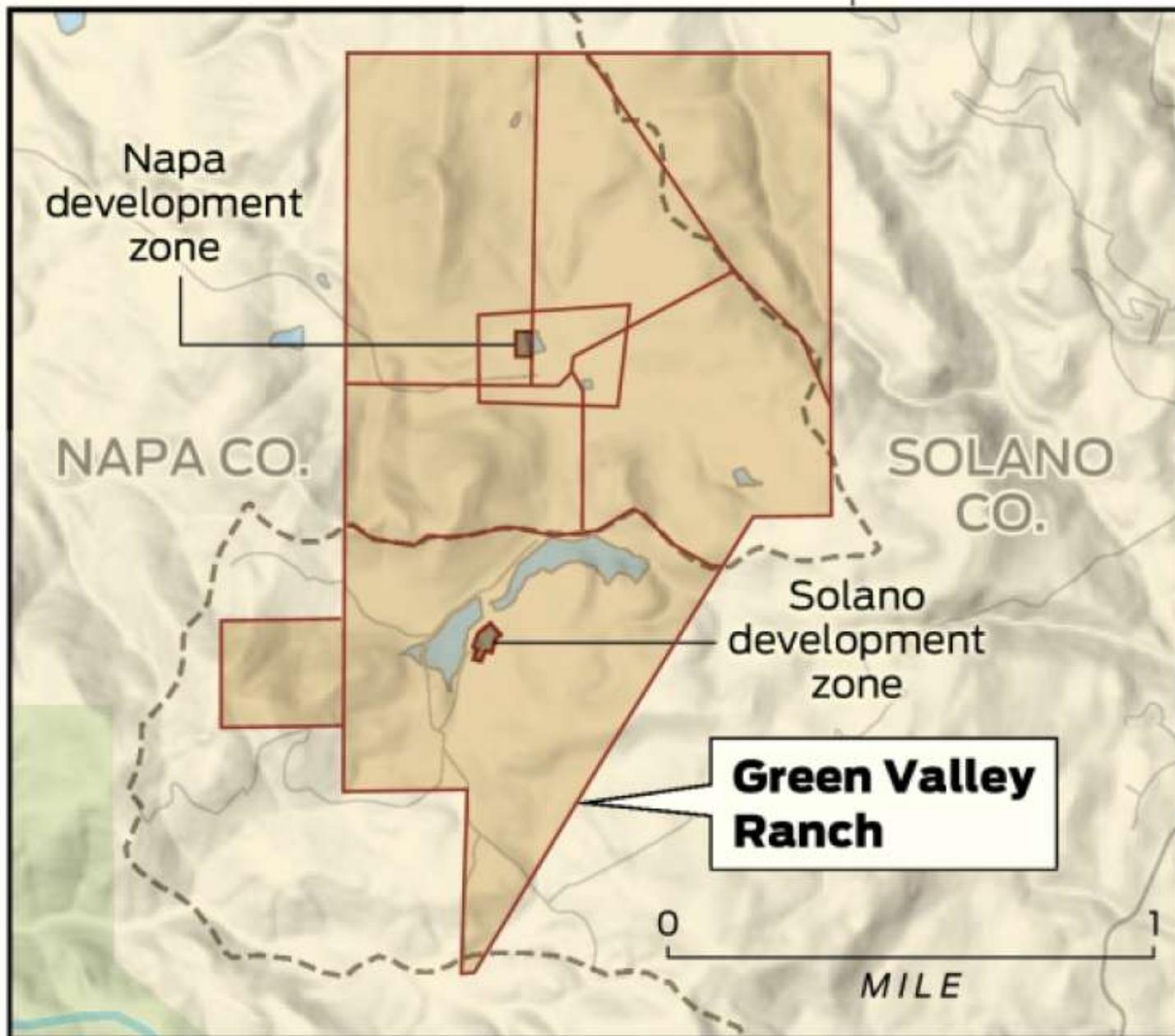
A new owner could sell the parcels individually, but the current owners hope someone will keep it together “and nurture the land the way we did,” Dickinson said.

New in Napa

Two large properties in southern Napa County are up for sale for the first time in more than 40 years. Napa Soda Springs, 858-acres, contains nothing but the ruins of a 19th-century resort. Green Valley Ranch, with 950 acres spread over Napa and Solano counties, has five residences with a total of 14 bedrooms, three lakes and a small vineyard.







Sources: Gerry Rohm, JLL; Ginger Margin, Sotheby's International Realty; Joel Toller, Coldwell Banker

Napa Soda Springs contains six parcels, all in prime Napa Valley grape-growing country. Because of the hilly terrain, setback rules and other requirements, about 150 acres could “feasibly” be used for vineyards, Rohm said.

Rohm wouldn’t name the owner, but public records show it has been owned since the mid-1970s by Richard Ehrenberger, a Berkeley architect, and a few family members.

The owners visited the property “when they wanted to hike,” Rohm said. “They used it as their own private Idaho.”

A home on the Ehrenbergers’ property burned in the Atlas Fire. Sally Eaves Lewis, the great-granddaughter of the colonel who built Soda Springs Resort in the 1870s, perished in the fire, along with her caregiver Teresa Santos. Lewis was 90 and lived in a home on a 5-acre parcel within the Ehrenbergers’ property that is separately owned and not part of the sale, Rohm said.

Col. John Putnam Jackson bought Soda Springs in 1872 and developed it into a lavish resort. Rohm said there were 200 hotel rooms. Most of the structures were built from stone that was quarried nearby, in a melange of architectural styles.

One account described “Victorian gazebos, Greek temples, Southern plantation homes and medieval towers.” There was a ballroom, music hall, stable, greenhouse, large outdoor pool, mineral baths, lawn tennis and clubhouse with billiard tables. After Putnam died in 1900, it went into a gradual decline, hastened by Prohibition, World War I and fire. Now those buildings are in ruins, with eucalyptus trees growing through their centers.

The grounds, once graced by manicured flower beds, statues, Italian cypress and citrus trees, are now mainly oaks, yucca and cacti. There are still more than 30 springs on the property, including five mineral springs; one produces a lemon-flavored bubbly water. There are sweeping views of Napa Valley and the bay, and on a clear day, you can see Salesforce Tower, about 50 miles away by car.



Tom Ruge at Ranch House at Green Valley Ranch.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

It's almost impossible to build hotels in the unincorporated areas of Napa County; nearly all new commercial development is within city limits. However, if a property has certain types of historic designations, it could be redeveloped under its original use, subject to various reviews and approvals.

Although Napa Soda Springs is zoned as agricultural watershed, because it is a "landmark of special significance," the owner could "apply to the county for a use permit that authorizes uses consistent with the historic uses and structures." That's according to a legal opinion Rohm got from Napa land use attorney Thomas Adams.

Brian Bordona, Napa County's deputy planning director, said he could not say whether the property could be used as a resort without doing research.

Another historic resort from the late 1900s, Aetna Springs, is being redeveloped in Pope Valley, about 50 miles north of Soda Springs. In December, Alchemy Resorts bought 3,100 acres that included the nearly 700-acre Aetna Springs property and 2,400 acres about 10 minutes away.

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Aetna Springs is on the National Register of Historic Places and continued to operate long after Soda Springs closed. David Wickline, owner of Alchemy Resorts, said he has planning permits that allow for 70 guest rooms and a couple dozen glamping tents, a small winery and 16 residential estate lots on the Aetna property. He does not plan to reopen a golf course there that closed in January.

Alchemy bought the 3,100 acres for \$22 million from the Dallas Police and Fire Pension System, which took a huge loss on it.

Soda Springs deserves its \$50 million premium price because of its premium location, Rohm said.

Wickline said the beauty of Aetna Springs is its natural, pristine setting. Driving the 30 minutes there from St. Helena “is like going back in time 150 years,” he said.

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