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EDITORIALS

Wilderness Worthy Of Domenici Touch

The name of New Mexico's senior senator, Pete V. Domenici, graces at least four Albuquerque buildings, ranging up to the federal courthouse on Lomas.

Impressive — until you look east to the timeless legacy that looms high above the buildings. The Sandia Wilderness doesn't have his name, but Domenici's fingerprints are all over the magnificent backdrop forever preserved for his hometown.

Almost 30 years after the establishment of the Sandia Wilderness, Domenici started working on an encore in Las Cruces, another city blessed with a signature eastern ridgeline: the Organ Mountains. Domenici unveiled the rough outlines of a wilderness proposal in late 2005, and local advocates have kept the ball rolling.

Las Cruces has another blessing — a mixed one — of imminent explosive growth. Many residents worry it could overwhelm a lifestyle that revolves around the natural setting of ridges, canyons and valleys, largely preserved as a result of the prevalence of federal and state land ownership.

Testifying to the level of concern is the remarkable consensus that has formed around the plan as it has evolved locally. A coalition of interests more often at odds with one another — hunters, environmentalists, horsemen, hikers, business people — are comfortably united. The governments of Doña Ana County, Las Cruces, Sunland Park, Mesilla and Hatch have signed on to the proposal.

The High Tech Consortium of Southern New Mexico is a vocal supporter. Some of the areas proposed for protection would provide permanent buffer for development-sensitive aerospace and defense installations that are a cornerstone of the region's emerging technology sector. All of the areas provide outdoor amenities that are a magnet for many research and development professionals.

Advocates have accomplished their task, building the solid foundation of support that is a prerequisite for congressional consideration of wilderness areas.

Community members stepped up and seized the opportunity to identify for protection the public land parcels that have adorned their lives; those they would