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Bleeding the West out of the West

With lifting of building moratorium, mining town fears losing its flavor in rush of new construction

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Up the twisting narrow streets of Bisbee, wedged beside hand-built rock walls and delicate wire fences, a backhoe works on a new sewer system.

Completion of the system will lift a building moratorium and unleash what some think could be a rush of new construction in this historic mining town near the Mexican border.

That growth raises a question echoing across the West: how to accommodate new houses and businesses without destroying the "real West" ambience, the atmosphere that attracted people in the first place.

"There isn't a town in the West that doesn't have similar pressures," said Hal Rothman, a professor of history at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, and author of *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth Century American West*.

"I call the people moving in neo-natives," Rothman said. "They bring the best of intentions, the best of goals, but they're transformative because of what they want the towns to provide."

They move to places they've enjoyed visiting, Rothman said, then they want more services.

"Pretty soon, the things people did for love, they now do for money," Rothman said. "The highways become more trafficked. It gets more and more expensive, so the people who work there can't afford to live there and have to commute.

"You kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

The building moratorium for Old Bisbee and the Warren neighborhood to the southeast was imposed in 1996 as part of a consent order from the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, Bisbee City Manager Robert G. Yandow said.

The 100-year-old sewer system was overloaded, causing backups, and some of the clay pipes were cracked, allowing runoff into the system and overwhelming the water treatment plant.

In December, the city started construction on a \$32 million project to replace and rehabilitate the sewer system and build a new treatment facility.

The project was scheduled to take two years, but the contractor pledges to finish in 18 months.

New building push

In an annual report on the city, published by the Cochise College Center for Economic Research, Director Ken Jones predicts that when the moratorium is lifted, "a flurry of new construction activity should take place in various sectors of the city, including Old Bisbee."

Perhaps because it is so remote, sitting 100 miles southeast of Tucson, Bisbee has so far managed to avoid the population growth and land grabs that have hit other cities like Prescott and Flagstaff.

An average of two homes a year were built in Bisbee from 1992 to 2002, 10 permits were issued in 2003 and eight in 2004.

Although vacant land is scarce in the downtown and Warren areas, there is plenty of space and opportunity for building in the San Jose section, one of the working neighborhoods just down the road beyond historic Old Bisbee, where tourists stop.

It is tucked in with other neighborhoods like Don Luis and Tintown, past the bend where Arizona 80 meets 92 at Arizona's oldest traffic circle.

This is where a Safeway sits, where there are motels for tourists who can't afford \$150 a night at the historic Copper Queen Hotel in Old Bisbee, and where there are building lots with unobstructed southern views.

This part of the city is not affected by the moratorium, and new construction already is planned.

Yandow said a 58-unit subdivision of single-family homes will go in here, and a builder is considering developing a 900-acre parcel with light commercial, townhouses and some single-family homes.

Only one-third of the large parcel is currently in the city limits, but the developer plans to petition to have the rest annexed into the city. It could mean hundreds of new sewer connections.

An Old West town

Bisbee is rich in history.

It exploded into existence in the late 1870s, with the discovery of rich mineral deposits - gold, silver and especially copper - in the Mule Mountains.

Copper was needed in huge quantities for the electrical lines being installed in homes and factories across the country, and by 1900, the Copper Queen Mine produced 3 million pounds a month.

Mining camps quickly sprung up in the notorious Brewery Gulch, which became home to 47 saloons, brothels and smelters.

Much of the town was built before the domination of the automobile, and many houses on the steep hillsides are accessible only by climbing hundreds of now-famous stairs.

By the early 1900s, Bisbee housed 20,000 people, the largest city between St. Louis and San Francisco.

"Raw sewage basically ran down the hillside from shacks on the hill," Yandow said.

A Tucson newspaper from 1908 described Brewery Gulch this way:

"The street is somewhat frightful from a sanitary point of view. It is covered with slime several inches deep and about 4 feet wide, from which comes a nauseating odor. . . . It remains a disgrace to the city."

Typhoid and dysentery epidemics were a regular occurrence.

A sewer system was installed in the 1900s, but as more houses tapped into existing pipes they overloaded the system.

"It worked OK in the '20s, '30s and '40s," said Russell McConnell, public works director. "But then people put in two bathrooms, dishwashers, washing machines."

When the mines closed in the mid-1970s, people fled, and the city's then-cheap housing became a haven for the arts and retirement crowds.

Change of pace

Today, tourism, not copper, is king.

Old boarding houses once used by miners serve as quaint bed-and-breakfasts, the mine operates underground tours, and the Bisbee Mining and Historical Museum was opened in conjunction with the Smithsonian.

But catering to people who want to see the Old West requires a fragile balancing act, said Ed Marston, a longtime observer and writer about the West.

Tourists want a "real West" experience but with hot showers, comfy beds and good wine.

And working communities require an infrastructure.

"You can look at these little towns through some sort of a lens," Marston said. "But you can't ask a community without resources to maintain a fantasy. Leaving them without an economic base keeps them in a form of poverty.

"Small towns often don't have a hospital to take care of their sick, or a decent library, or they're stretched to have good schools . . . all those things Americans want in their communities.

"How do you strike that balance? In Bisbee's case, you strike it by having a cute little downtown, sort of like a Disneyland, and around it will be Anaheim, California, modern America with the strip malls and all the stuff we don't want."

Marston said people should realize they're seeing a prettied-up version of the West.

"If you're interested in an ersatz experience, you shouldn't pretend it's authentic," he said. "Don't go down the Grand Canyon on a \$3,000 raft trip and think you're doing it like John Wesley Powell.

"Or declare the place a historic district and let the sewage run down the streets. Then tourists can get a real sense of how that was. Anything else is a compromise. And then it's a question of how fake is it going to be."

Changing lifestyles

At 75 Erie St. in Bisbee's Lowell neighborhood, Pat and Heather Grimm recently renovated the Caldwell Building, which has been a Rexall Pharmacy, a lumber company and a Laundromat.

It opened in March as the Bisbee Breakfast Club, offering fare Pat made famous cooking at Dot's Diner for the past three years.

The Club, which caters to locals and visitors alike, is open Thursday through Monday for breakfast and lunch.

It serves specialties like Eggs Zorba, with spinach, feta and onions; shaved-ham and melted-Swiss sandwich with Jim Beam barbecue sauce; and rhubarb pie judged eighth in the nation.

The new venue has 2,500 square feet, many times larger than the 340 square feet at Dot's, and it has 40 seats, twice as many as before.

In a nod to water conservation, the bathrooms all have low-water-use toilets.

The Grimms ripped the plaster off the walls, revealing brick blackened in fires in the early 1910s and 1920s and installed a serpentine counter where patrons can watch Pat cook.

They have a friendly, loud environment, where locals can rush in for a fix of Kitchen Sink Cookies, with walnuts, pecans, almonds, chocolate chips, raisins and coconut.

Author Rothman said the growth in Bisbee is still small, beneath the radar. It is fueled by increasingly affluent retiring baby boomers.

"We're living longer," he said. "And there is a move to alternative lifestyles, away from the chaos and congestion and rising housing prices in urban areas."

The change prompts a psychological change for the community.

"With increased migration and visitation, they will end up selling their identity rather than what's in their dirt," Rothman said. "The question is: Are you better off?"

"It's certainly not as grueling as working in the mine, but it takes a psychic toll.

"The place you love ceases to be the place you love and becomes the place you work. And it's usually serving others. It begins to feel, to you, much different."

Rothman said the trick is to find the best of the Old Town and the best of the new.

"I tell communities, 'You need to sit down collectively and figure out what you want your town to be. Then you can protect the things you care about.'

"If you do that, there's no guarantee you'll be happy with what happens, but if you don't, there is a guarantee that you won't be."

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