

## Border town would gain from development of mine

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McDERMITT — There's hope in the wind in the Quinn River Valley, where Nevada and Oregon touch beneath the jagged, snowy face of the Santa Rosa mountains.

In the 10 years since the McDermitt mercury mine closed, this town of 269 residents has watched its school enrollment drop, jobs evaporate and its economy wilt.

Now comes word that the mine site in the windswept sagebrush 15 miles away might reopen, this time unearthing gallium, a little-known but enticing element with uses still being discovered.

The stakes are high: additional jobs, revitalized commerce and a boost in tax revenues.



 The main street of McDermitt, seen from the Oregon side of the border, is home to just a few buildings. - Marilyn Newton/RGJ

“We lost a lot of our skilled labor. I think they’ll come back if this opportunity presents itself,” John Moddrell, principal of McDermitt Combined School, said of the 50 to 60 jobs lost when the mercury mine shut down in 1992.

Moddrell has seen what a working mine can mean to the area, which began in the mid-1860s as a military outpost named for Lt. Col. Charles McDermitt. (The second “t” on the town’s name was added in the 1880s; the state, a century later, reportedly refused to change it back because of costs.)

In the late 1980s, Moddrell said, the Cordero mineworkers brought equipment down to the town and built a new athletic field for the school.

Additionally, the good times meant a new sewer system and improvements to the town’s water well system.

“If the school needed something, you just went to the mine,” Moddrell said. “They had an excellent lab and they let kids go out there for experiments.”

This year, the school accommodates 192 students from kindergarten through 12th grade, compared with 240 a decade ago.

“This community was wild in the ’80s. It would be nice to get more youth revitalization,” Moddrell said. “People want more after-school activities. In the ’80s, something was always going on.”

Claudia Elordi, owner of the Say When Bar Café and Casino, recalled when first the Cordero mine and

then the McDermitt mine closed.

“They sure drained our work force. It hurt a lot,” she said. “A lot of these people would like to have their jobs back.”

Longtime resident Jim Albisu watched with dismay as the town’s youth abandoned McDermitt after the mine closings.

A new mine, he said, would reverse that.

“It would help keep the young people here, it would give them something to do,” Albisu said. “The economy’s pretty dead now.”

As McDermitt’s postmaster, Lorraine Huttman has heard more than her share of talk in the past several months about a gallium mine.

“You hear so many things you’re not sure what’s true,” she said. “I’d hate to see the community change, but the economic boost would be good for us.”

That includes the nearby Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone reservation, home to 300 to 400 residents, where the jobless rate tops 50 percent, according to tribal chairman Bob Garfield.

“New jobs would help. A lot of our people went to other mines,” he said.

The area also would stand to gain revenues from three key taxes, said Russ Fields of the Nevada Mining Association.

- o Net proceeds of mines tax. Typically, it’s a levy on net income, with one-half of the revenue staying in the county and the rest going to the state’s general fund.

- o Property tax. A mine would pay tax on its land, as would additional employees as homeowners, with most of it returned to local government.

- o Sales tax. Mines invest in heavy equipment and other operating expenses, with a portion of the tax revenue remaining in the county.

“They need some help up there,” said Humboldt County Commissioner John Milton of Winnemucca, 75 miles south of McDermitt. “Even if it’s 20 to 25 jobs, it doesn’t take much to make an impact.”

Despite the down times, the town clings to its sense of community, Moddrell said, and it got a major lift last month.

He and his staff are readying the school’s trophy case to accommodate awards for winning the state academic championship and the boys’ division 1A basketball title, the first ever in McDermitt.

“The bus came home at 3 a.m. and the townspeople got together and put up a big banner,” Moddrell said. “They even had hot chocolate for the kids — at 3 in the morning.”

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