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Boom strains some services

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ROCK SPRINGS -- Sublette County Commissioner Betty Fear knows firsthand how tough it is during boom times to keep employees at her restaurant and motel in Big Piney.

"Keeping employees is a constant problem ... Most folks (in Big Piney) who want to work, want to work for top wages in the oil field," Fear said Friday during the final day of a two-day conference in Rock Springs.

"You can get help during those high peaks, but keeping employees during the bust until the next high peak comes along is very, very difficult ... It's been terrible trying to plan ahead all across the private sector," she said.

"In southwest Wyoming, we're going to continue to have this boom-and-bust cycle until we get some kind of mechanism in place so that we don't have these constant starts and stops in industry development," Fear said. "The industry is good for a lot of things -- it keep the dollars rolling into the towns and cities from tax revenues -- but we need a little more certainty in drilling activity and production.

"Industry needs to run at a steady pace for the next 10 years," she added. "We'll all have better communities if we're able to do that."

The energy boom in southwest Wyoming is straining the resources and infrastructure of towns and cities such as Rock Springs and Big Piney, even though tax revenues are increasing and municipal budgets are rising, various officials said at the conference titled "Boom and Bust: A Public Dialogue."

Roads, law enforcement, human services, public health and the judicial system are all being affected, primarily from the increasing population that comes with energy development in areas such as the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline gas fields in western Wyoming.

In Sublette County, besides a shortage of workers, the boom's biggest impacts have been to county roads and law enforcement, Fear said.

"We're constantly having to put more money into those two areas," she said.

Fear said the boom has brought somewhat of a "transient population" to Big Piney, which provides many service industry workers for oil and gas rigs in the Jonah and Anticline fields.

"They don't move their families in, or buy a house, or really become a member of the community, so we're not seeing that increase in people and families like in Pinedale," she said.

New subdivisions

Sweetwater County Commissioner John Pallesen said the recent boom has brought some of the usual problems and issues with it, but has created some new ones, particularly with the various special water and sewer and solid waste districts scattered throughout the county.

He said there's been a huge growth of subdivisions in the county in order to keep pace with new workers moving into the area. In 2003, the county permitted three new subdivisions. In 2004, the county permitted 16 new subdivisions, he noted.

Pallesen said the new subdivisions are placing strains on the special districts, especially those that serve the smaller areas of the county.

Special districts are autonomous agencies that institute property taxes to operate. But Pallesen said in recent months, for the first time ever, several special districts have approached the commission about possible funding.

He said one water and sewer district in Rock Springs has maintained a minimum rate and tap fee for decades. But a new subdivision under construction and another planned for the area are threatening the system.

"Their system is failing, and they're asking us for money ... These are problems we've never had before -- we've never, ever been approached by a special district." he said.

"But it's an extreme problem that can stop growth in its tracks ... It's totally out of the realm of what we're supposed to be doing, but we're scrambling now to try and help them out," Pallesen said.

Rock Springs City Councilman Neil Kourbelas said there was "no greater barometer" of the positive impacts of the boom than the city's budget. It grew from \$23.5 million in the 2003-04 fiscal year to a projection of \$29 million this year, an increase of 27 percent. More money resulted in nine new officers for the police department this year, among other items.

The downside, Kourbelas said, has been the strain on such infrastructure as the city's sewer treatment plant. The plant can process 2.8 million gallons of sewage per day and is operating at near capacity now. A planned, two-phase, multimillion-dollar project will

nearly double that capacity, but the city has had to increase rates about 60 percent in the past three years to pay for it.

"That's the real impact ... We love to see this prosperity, but there's a second side to that cutting blade, and sometimes it cuts backwards," Kourbelas said.

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