

## Gas industry transforms town

By Rob Shaul

Miracles are performed in the gas-drilling fields of Wyoming every day by roustabout and frac crews, drillers, hot-shot crews, water-truck drivers, office managers and others at all levels. No one in Sublette County - no rancher, waitress, sheriff's deputy, newspaper editor, Bureau of Land Management employee - works harder, and we ought to respect that.

It's common for someone working in the Jonah or Pinedale Anticline fields, which hold more gas than the entire Powder River Basin, to put in 16-hour days for eight weeks straight. And it's common for hands to work 24, 36, 48 hours straight when problems arise. Sure, gas field workers make a lot of money. But they pay for it in pressure to perform, physical discomfort, danger, incredibly long days and time away from home and family.

We need to know about Sublette County's proud oil and gas tradition and history. Just because the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline fields are relatively new, that doesn't mean oil and gas is new to Sublette County or even Pinedale. The first well on the mesa was drilled in the early 1960s, and there has been an active oil and gas industry here since the 1920s. Many Pinedale and Big Piney natives have worked in the fields for years, and the industry has always been a huge contributor to our economy. The idea that oil and gas began in Pinedale with the discovery of the Jonah Field 10 years ago is nonsense.

Let's realistically acknowledge some of the impacts of gas drilling. Certainly, Pinedale is changing, but not drastically. I still get caught up visiting with people at the post office. By 8 p.m. on winter nights, Pine Street is still empty of traffic, and by 10 p.m. on weeknights, three of four bars are usually closed. We still have a beautiful library, great schools and an amazing array of community events. I've heard complaints about the new people changing the quality of hunting, fishing and the outdoors, but I haven't seen it. It doesn't take long to escape people and civilization by hitting the hills: There is plenty of wilderness to go around.

We had problems with drugs, domestic violence, traffic and affordable housing long before the Jonah and Pinedale Anticline fields started booming. The idea that Pinedale was a perfect little town before the current boom is inaccurate. Yes, the boom is affecting Pinedale, but not in the doom-and-gloom way some people describe it.

Let's try to keep an open mind. Sometimes, industry does put the environment and safety first. Sometimes, industry does take action that costs the company money but is good for the wildlife, the company's employees and our community. Just as we hope parachuting-in industry representatives won't stereotype us as bumpkins, let's not stereotype them. Terms like "oilfield trash" and "gashole" don't help anything. There are good and bad people working in the gas industry, just as there are good and bad long-time residents of Pinedale.

Let's also not see oil and gas companies as moneybags. It's not respectful of them and doesn't speak well of us.

It's up to us to be forward-thinking about what local government needs. It's hard for industry to respond to concerns about affordable housing when the Pinedale Town Council and Sublette County Commissioners don't approve small-lot subdivisions close to Pinedale. It's hard for industry to address concerns about traffic when the Pinedale Town Council and Sublette County Commissioners aren't dogged enough to get a new access road built where we need it.

We can be gracious, welcoming newcomers with a handshake and a smile. It can be difficult for new people to move here, and we can be a closed, judgmental town. This is wrong, and it is not the Western way.

I know this is hard, but let's appreciate this latest boom. Yes, it's going to end as all booms do; yet while there are plenty of problems associated with booms, they are nothing compared to the pain that's coming with the eventual bust. Meanwhile, our economy is booming, the real estate market is on fire, jobs are plentiful and schools and government are flush with money.

We have an incredible opportunity because of the gas boom. Let's not squander it with sniping. I sometimes miss the slower pace of town we enjoyed 10 years ago, but I don't miss the lean times that went along with it. It's all a matter of perspective.

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