Contaminated Mining Site May Become Tourist Attraction

CATHERINE TSAI,Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A contaminated 19th century silver mining camp could become a bigger tourism draw for a sparsely populated, high-alpine county in southwest Colorado's San Juan Mountains.

Commissioner Stan Whinnery hopes turning the Ute-Ulay mill site, near Lake City, into a cleaned up public site instead of a private one will lure more visitors year-round to remote Hinsdale County, which has about one person per square mile.

LKA International Inc., a gold mining company based in Gig Harbor, Wash., said in late February that it had signed an agreement to transfer the site to Hinsdale County, which will need help cleaning up contamination from lead and heavy metals, restoring buildings, and creating a mining museum and possibly lodging, Whinnery said.

The Ute-Ulay site on Henson Creek sits on a backcountry scenic byway that connects Lake City, Silverton and Ouray. Prospectors trespassing on Ute Indian land in the 1870s likely named the lead and silver veins the Ute and Ulay veins to flatter the Utes and Chief Ouray, though they apparently didn't know how to spell Ouray's name, said Grant Houston, editor of the Silver World newspaper and president of the Hinsdale County Historical Society. The structures supported mining that has occurred in fits and spurts since the late 1800s.

The camp already is a popular stop for passers-by.

"If we had a nickel for every photo taken from there, we'd be millionaires already," said Whinnery, whose family was one of the first to settle in Hinsdale County in the 1800s.

LKA acquired the camp and nearby property in the 1980s, but silver prices never rose high enough for LKA to revive silver mining, chairman Kye Abraham said.

With some historic buildings starting to rot and collapse, Abraham and Whinnery talked over dinner one night about what could be done.

"I said if we didn't do something soon, we're going to lose them forever," Abraham recalled.

So Whinnery began working to gain county control of the camp four years ago. In 2011, nomadic arts organization Colorado Art Ranch gathered sculptors, a poet and others to brainstorm what Ute-Ulay could become, with ideas ranging from adding a zip line to an ice rink to a museum, Whinnery said.

LKA will transfer the camp and structures for free.

It will be no small matter for the mill to come off property tax rolls, considering roughly 95 percent of the county is public land. Whinnery estimates that the county will lose about $1,500 to $1,900 in tax revenue, or less than 1 percent of Hinsdale County's $4 million annual budget. "Yet it's not like we're not going to miss it," he said.

Though the mine is inactive, it is covered by a permit that allows for mining. The state health department, state mining officials, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Bureau of Land Management and others have worked on the transfer while addressing lead contamination that could threaten Lake City's drinking water.

Whinnery is optimistic that work to stabilize rotting buildings and cleanup could be completed this year, at a cost of $1 million to $2 million. LKA said the state health department, EPA and the nonprofit Colorado Brownfields Foundation will help with funding. The foundation helps redevelop sites that may be polluted.

"Mining companies sometimes are seen as a step below murderers and thugs," Abraham said. "It's gratifying to see how agencies and a private landowner can work together to get something done like this when it needs to happen."

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