

Cotter at the Crossroads

A community grapples with a uranium mill's past, present and future



Penni Benkler, left, of Conifer and Janet and David Bonstell of Buffalo, N.Y. check out the view at the Royal Gorge. Times-Call/Jeff Haller

Officials are not blaming tourist slump on proposal

*By Jackie Hutchins
The Daily Record News Group
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With controversy surrounding the proposal to bring radioactive soil from New Jersey to be stored south of Cañon City, it might be tempting for managers of Cañon City area tourist attractions to use it as a scapegoat for this summer's visitor slowdown.

Instead - though they don't agree on what impact the soil shipments might have on them if allowed to go ahead - they agree on one thing: The wildfire season and drought this summer and Gov. Bill Owens' comments to a nationwide audience in June that made it sound as if all of Colorado was on fire have hurt them much more than publicity about the Cotter Corp. proposal.

"It has been a complete disaster, the worst year this park has ever had, probably that tourism in Colorado has ever had," according to Mike Bandera, manager of the Royal Gorge Bridge, a suspension bridge that spans the Royal Gorge 1,053 feet above the Arkansas River and offers visitors scenic views and trails, an incline railway to the bottom of the canyon and an aerial tram.

Attractions around the state are down 15 percent to 50 percent, Bandera noted. The bridge itself has been down about 19 percent all summer.

The bridge, which has averaged about 500,000 visitors a year for the past 20 years, probably will get only about 400,000 by the end of 2002, he said.

Bandera said his business was fine until the first wildfire broke out in early June and the negative publicity started nationwide. "The cancellations started. People were making decisions about where to go on vacation and they chose to go other places," Bandera said.

He had hoped for a rebound in July after the Iron Mountain fire southwest of Cañon City was out and the 138,000-acre Hayman fire southwest of Denver had died down, but it never came. "It's not recovering. We're not going to recover this year."

Mark Greska, who owns the Royal Gorge Route, said business at the scenic train ride was up 35 percent in May and with the bookings he already had at that point he was poised for a record year. He had expected to end the summer with a 25 percent increase in business. But after the wildfires started business dropped off and has been down 12 percent to 15 percent all summer, he said.

The train business started in 1998 with 75,000 visitors the

first year. "We were hoping to carry about 100,000 people (this year). That's not going to happen," Greska said. He had been considering expanding to operate daily in the off-season, but now is waiting to see what happens to the proposal to bring the radioactive soil to Cotter Corp. He said he may have to cut back operations to just six days a week next summer if visitation declines.

Bandera said the drought has caused low water levels in area rivers, impacting one of the main tourist industries in the area - rafting companies. Rafting businesses have told him they are seeing customer decreases ranging between 30 percent and 40 percent this summer. And because rafting draws visitors to the Royal Gorge area, loss of rafting customers affects the other area businesses as well, he said.

Tony Keenan, owner of Whitewater Adventure Outfitters, said his rafting business is down 30 percent this year. He said the fires and publicity about them, as well as the governor's comments about the severity of the wildfires, have been detrimental to tourism throughout the state, not just in Cañon City.

He said his business opened for the season in late April and he noticed his first drop in business after the Iron Mountain fire. Reservations had been about equal to last year at that point. But after that fire, followed by the Hayman fire and the governor's comments, business spiked downward, Keenan said.

The low water levels also have hurt, he said. "Water conditions have kept a lot of people away, particularly Colorado people."

George Turner, executive director of the Cañon City Chamber of Commerce, reported tourism in the area is down about 20 percent overall this year, and he attributes the decline mostly to the drought and fires.

Tourism is very important to the Cañon City economy and is the second-largest employer, after the prisons, he noted.

Media, Gov. Owens criticized

The attractions owners and managers place much of the blame for the summer's slowdown on the media and on Gov. Owens.

Greska said his business felt the impact after Owens made a public statement during the early days of the Hayman fire that the entire state was on fire.

Actually wildfires were burning on only about 1 percent of the state. But with the perception that fire was everywhere, groups began canceling their reservations, Greska said.

"The publicity was much worse than the fires were," Bandera said. "Ninety-nine percent of the state was not on fire."

He increased advertising for the Royal Gorge Bridge, hoping to counter the impact, and area attractions also have been working with the state to try to counteract the wildfire publicity with a public relations campaign, he said.

Reeling from what they feel is a slowdown in business due in part to bad publicity, area tourist businesses now face possible publicity about the Cotter Co. proposal to bring radioactive soil through town to be stored at the company's property south of town.

Reactions on what that will mean for tourism are mixed.

"I think it will end up devastating the tourism economy, not just for Cañon City but for all of southern Colorado," Greska said.

He opposes the plan to accept shipments of contaminated soil from New Jersey, and said he wants people to look at what the long-range impact on tourism could be.

It will be harder to attract visitors if people begin to associate Cañon City with nuclear-contaminated soil, he predicted.

Greska said he thinks publicity about the shipments of soil from the Maywood Superfund Site in New Jersey could draw attention to the existing Superfund site at Lincoln Park and scare visitors away. And he's not convinced the soil from New Jersey is any less toxic than the material currently stored at Cotter.

"If this stuff is so benign, why don't they leave it there?" he asked.

Cañon City already has successfully overcome an image some tourist towns might shrink from - that of a prison town, home to federal and state penitentiaries.

"That stigma has been overcome," Greska said. On his train route, guides point the prisons out, people are interested in it, he said. "The prison poses no threat," he noted. "The prison is a boon to the economy."

Bandera said visitors tend to be curious about the prisons, but not alarmed by their presence.

He isn't sure what the impact of bringing in the soil might be, but thinks it will depend on how much publicity it gets if the shipments are allowed.

He said he had never heard about the Cotter Superfund site until he began looking for a home when he moved to the community about a year and a half ago, when his real estate agent mentioned it. It was definitely not on the chamber of commerce Web page or relocation packet, he said, noting he thinks it's not something of which visitors would generally be aware.

Steve Rose, executive director of the Main Street U.S.A., Cañon City Inc. program that promotes historic restoration and economic development downtown, said that although

it's a local issue that's hot, he doesn't see it as a tourism issue.

"I try to put myself in the place of a tourist. If I go somewhere the last thing I would think about is radioactive waste," he said.

Turner, who was mayor of Cañon City during another controversial period in Cotter's relationship with the community in the late 1970s, said he has heard comments that the soil shipments could have an adverse impact on tourism.

"If we become known as a nuclear waste dump, I suspect that would have an impact on our tourism." He said he wasn't sure how the chamber of commerce would respond if that happened, but he likely would start by contacting Cotter officials to talk to them about it, as he did in 1979.

Although there have been recent community meetings held on the issue, "they were more riots than meetings," Turner said. "I came away terribly embarrassed as a resident of Cañon City. I don't like to see that kind of hysteria."

He said he found in the late 1970s that calm and logical community discussion of the issues helped, and he believes it would now too.

"There is a real possibility we're going to lose a major employer in this community and I think that's unfortunate because I think they have been a responsible industrial neighbor," he said.

"Yes, they contaminated the area and there's no question about that," he said. But he blames the lack of adequate regulations in the early days of the nuclear industry for the contamination. "There wasn't enough knowledge about the contamination and the rules were inadequate," he said.

Turner said he believes today the rules are adequate to make sure the company will control material brought to the site.

More promotion planned

Looking ahead to how they can overcome this year's low visitor counts and rebound, some area attractions hope to do more advertising next year, but others will do less.

Bandera said he will increase his efforts to draw visitors to the area.

He already is planning his biggest ad campaign ever, and also will work with Pikes Peak Country Attractions, Royal Gorge Destinations and Action 22 to market the region and to address the image that may have been left in visitors' minds by this summer's wildfires.

Keenan said he hasn't made any decisions about advertising next year.

"Obviously we're going to be back next year," he said, but because he took in less money this summer he may not be in a financial situation to increase marketing.

Keenan said he thinks the Chamber of Commerce and Cañon City should be more proactive at promoting the area as a destination.

"The whole tourist industry around here should be promoted a lot better," he said.

Greska said he will do less advertising if the Maywood soil is accepted.

He said since he opened the train ride four years ago, he has concentrated his efforts on it. But if the soil is accepted he will see it as a sign that local and state officials don't understand the importance of tourism, and he said he doesn't want to spend his money countering the effects of their decisions. "I'll pull back because it's not worth it. It takes the pleasure out of promoting a clean attraction, a clean area, which is what Cañon City is."

Instead, Greska said he will switch his focus to his other railroad attraction in Colorado, promoting the Georgetown loop.

Whether they plan to advertise more or less, those in the tourism industry hope wildfire danger will subside next year.

"We'll all be praying for rain and snow this winter. We need a lot of that too so there's no more fires," Bandera said.

Keenan agreed snow would be the best thing the Cañon City area could get, for alleviating the drought and the fire danger, and for bringing people to Colorado for skiing this winter and for rafting when that season starts again next spring.

If Bandera could get out one message now, it would be that autumn in the Cañon City area has warm days with lots of sunshine and cool nights. "We're all open for business. It's a great time to visit."

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