

Get A GRIP

PROMOTING HEALTHY
COMMUNITIES
BY PROTECTING OUR
ENVIRONMENT

► Responsible Mining ► Water Protection ► Community Planning ► Clean Air

At stake: the future of our communities, our land, and our values

2020 Visions Forum Series Focuses on Need for Community Planning

“As Silver City and Grant County experience a decline in a traditional economic base founded on resource extraction and related industries and businesses, quality of place will increasingly become the most important driver of economic development for the region.”

– Silver City Comprehensive Plan 2004 (emphasis added)

“You call some place Paradise, kiss it goodbye.”

– Eagles, “The Last Resort,” 1976

As the Eagles so concisely observed, areas such as Silver City and Grant County face a dilemma: how to reap economic development from their “quality of place” without destroying that quality in the process.

We are not alone with this dilemma. In rural America, counties with federal wilderness areas grew six times as fast as those without such areas. This growth produced more than the low-wage service jobs that come with a tourist-based economy; high-paying professional service jobs, such as lawyers, engineers, and software developers, also boomed in these areas. Many such professionals are looking to relocate – especially as baby boomers enter their

fifties – and one of their top priorities in choosing a new hometown is the presence nearby of federally protected lands. The same is true for many retirees, who bring not only their retirement incomes, but also significant government transfers in the form of Medicare payments.

So we conservationists have been correct to argue that environmental protection does not have to come at the expense of the economy. But that means we must address the converse: will prosperity come at the expense of the environmental – and social, for that matter – values that we cherish?

We asked Rebecca Carter of the Sonoran Institute to kick off our forum series by addressing these questions. Speaking to 75 people at the Global Resource Center on March 22, Dr. Carter described how other “gateway” communities – those that serve as an entry point into protected lands – have been affected by rapid growth and how some have worked to preserve the best aspects of their communities.

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NMED Eases Soil Cleanup Requirement in Hurley; PD Still Unhappy



Children playing in some Hurley soils risk illness from consuming copper

Last November, after years of investigation into the risks posed by soil contamination in Hurley, the New Mexico Environment Dept. (NMED) issued a crucial decision: Phelps Dodge would be required to reduce the concentration of copper in the town’s soils to a level of 2,000 milligrams per kilogram of soil or less. Between 80 percent and 90 percent of Hurley’s land area exceeds this concentration.

At this level, according to studies paid for by the company and reviewed by NMED, GRIP, and the Community Work Group, there would be a 95% likelihood that young children living in Hurley – the most vulnerable group – would each feel nauseous no more than five times a year as a result of swallowing copper.

Yes, you read that right. The ‘safe’ level was set not only by scientific study but also by a policy decision – made by NMED Secretary Ron Curry

– about how much risk of illness is acceptable.

Phelps Dodge disputed the agency’s decision. On March 18, the NMED raised the ‘safe’ level to 3,100 mg/kg, agreeing with PD’s claim that a consultant had made a technical error. About two-thirds of Hurley’s land area exceeds this new standard. This may not be enough for PD, which is considering launching a formal dispute resolution process.

GRIP and the Community Work Group – a diverse collection of area residents who since 1997 have provided input into this process – have asked to observe the negotiations between PD and NMED. Secretary Curry passed the buck, saying it would be up to Phelps Dodge. We have not heard back from the company.

The Community Work Group meets next on April 19 at 7 p.m. in the Bayard Community Center.