

Questa leaders visit Canada town for post-mining ideas

By Cody Hooks

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With a nearby ski village, nearly endless outdoors and a decommissioned mine, Kimberley, British Columbia, in Canada, shares a few standout features with Questa. That's why folks from Questa's economic development efforts took a trip to the former mining town, to generate ideas that may work in their Norte-o community.

Christian Isely, economic development advisor for Chevron Environmental Management Company (CEMC), said they took the two-day trip at the end of April to "learn from the Kimberley government and former mining executives ... because [Kimberley] is a good example of how a mining town can successfully transition to a post-mining economy."

Malaquias Rael, chairman of the Questa Economic Development Fund, said Tuesday (June 16) it was encouraging to see a town totally transition their economy because, "Like us, their mine had been there over a hundred years."

CEMC facilitated the trip, and helps facilitate an economic development plan with the fund and the village of Questa.

Kimberley, whose mine once produced zinc and lead, now markets itself to skiers and year-round outdoor enthusiasts, a tactic Questa has seemed ready to implement, centering many post-mine conversations around tourism and how best to leverage the largely untapped recreation potential of the R'o Grande del Norte National Monument and Carson National Forest.

Rael said Kimberley effectively markets itself within the region to nearby Calgary — "the Texas of British Columbia."

Rael said Kimberley, whose tourism website claims the town is home to the world's largest cuckoo clock, boasted a strong economic development network within the town of less than 8,000 people. The town also invested in a \$5.3 million solar project, the Sun Mine.

Isely and Rael both acknowledged that only some of Kimberley's examples will prove relevant to Questa and Northern New Mexico. But they also countered Questa has some opportunities the Canadian mountain town does not — especially agriculture.

"Agriculture is as old as civilization," Rael said, suggesting Questa could return to some pre-mining activities to diversify its economy. Rael said hay is a pretty solid bet for agriculture, and he touted the potential of establishing a microbrewery and complementary barley farms.

When asked, Rael also said hemp production could be a possibility for the area, too, noting hemp and marijuana are two different products. He also said they'd have to wait until hemp production is legal. A bill approved by the New Mexico legislature during its regular session and vetoed by Republican Gov. Susana Martinez would have legalized hemp research farms and, once sanctioned by the federal government, also have allowed commercial cultivation.

Unlike Questa, Kimberley had at least 10 years of planning before their mine went out of operation, a luxury foreign to Questa, as Chevron's announcement came out of the blue and hit the mine's 300 employees hard a year ago.

But Rael said Questa is in the middle stages of its economic development assessment, and is trying to both get things moving and be ready to hit the ground running with larger projects. Like Kimberley, Questenos should form committees to address specific needs in the community, like recreation and industry, he said.

While Chevron can help implement Questa's economic development plan, "Our partnership is based on Questa's ownership of a new future. It's their community, their vision," Isely said.