

# FEATURES

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# Questa fights to survive after mine's closure



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The New Mexican |

Ceilidh Creech holds up two bottles of beer brewed with hops from her property in Amalia outside Questa. With the craft beer industry flourishing, Creech and others say there's good potential for Questa to capitalize on both if the community can leverage the proper resources and strategy. Margaret Wright/The New Mexican

From a bird's-eye view, it's easy to trace how the barren terraces and hulking piles of rock from a century-old mine have marred the Red River valley where the village of Questa is nestled.

Less obvious is how the mine's presence has helped the community steel itself against hardship, a crucial quality as its members chart an uncertain economic future.

Questa's Democratic Mayor Mark Gallegos was elected in March 2014 just weeks before Chevron, the owner of the mine, closed it down, dealing a concussive blow to the village's 2,000 inhabitants. Says Gallegos, "We're still in the aftershocks."

Yet talk about the days ahead sounds more resolved than gloomy.

The decommissioning of the mine and the associated environmental cleanup

have provided some jobs, offering a glimmer of relief to the area's economy, as well as a morale boost for some of the workers. The mine's closure also has forced residents here to imagine new opportunities, and for many that could mean turning back to the land that's sustained families here for generations. Some villagers may look to cultivate high-value crops in the lush hollows that sluice between mountain peaks. And Questa's natural beauty, with Forest Service land



Ceilidh Creech kneels carefully to examine newly sprouted hops plants that flourish on their own throughout her property just north of Questa. Creech has been investing her own money for genetic and chemical analyses of the plant strains, in which craft beer brewers have already shown interest. Margaret Wright/The New Mexican

on one side and federal Bureau of Land Management acreage on the other, could make it a world-class tourist destination — although longtime residents are wary of selling their town out like another Taos or Santa Fe.

Like many of Questa's residents, Gallegos' family roots in the area run deep. His great-grandfather opened a general store decades before villagers began depending on steady work at the mine, tapping veins of the silvery element molybdenum for use in metal alloys. That prospecting scarred more than 1,000 acres of mountain faces during the course of the mine's centurylong life cycle and resulted in a lengthy Superfund cleanup process starting in 1999, when the Environmental Protection Agency pinpointed the site as the source of possible hazardous substance releases.

Yet the legacy of its chief employer has galvanized Questa in ways that extend beyond environmental and economic restoration efforts.

"The philosophy at the mine was that if you see something where somebody can get harmed, you take ownership," Gallegos says. "If someone doesn't go home from work that day, we'll all feel it. You start being aware of your surroundings and the person next to you, whether you know them or not. You want to be able to come home every day and hug your wife and kiss your kids, and not because you chose the easy way and took a shortcut."

He adds, "We really have made great strides to make sure that mentality keeps working and living even after the mine's closed."

But transitioning from a mining economy to an entrepreneurial one is a monumental task, not unlike the scale of decommissioning taking place three miles uphill, where Questa native David Trujillo labored in the dust and darkness of the mine for decades.

He says he and other workers from the village knew the operation would end eventually. Still, the community was plunged into a kind of mourning when Chevron announced last June that work would cease for good. About half of the 281 workers laid off in the process were rehired by contractors now responsible for decommissioning work, which includes hauling equipment from underground, auctioning it off, demolishing structures some of the miners helped build.

As the former president of the miner's union, Trujillo says he can't help but look out for his former co-workers.

"We're just hoping to see something — factory work, maybe," he says, or anything less competitive than construction jobs or seasonal work in nearby Taos Ski Valley. Some neighbors have reluctantly packed up to seek work elsewhere, heading out of state or south to a potash mining operation outside Carlsbad, "but a lot of people here just don't want to leave," Trujillo says.

An opportunity for a few to stay put arrived with the April 20 announcement that the Taos Mountain Energy Bar company will locate a new manufacturing facility in the Questa Industrial Park. Gov. Susana Martinez, Economic Development Cabinet Secretary Jon Barela and Democratic state Sen. Carlos Cisneros joined Gallegos for the ribbon cutting, which centered on the plant's creation of 15 full-time jobs.

It doesn't sound like a big deal with so many people looking for work, Gallegos says, but those openings represent an important step he hopes will help other local businesses build momentum.

After its establishment of the Questa Economic Development Fund in 2008,

Chevron began donating \$320,000 annually for the village to develop its post-mining economy, with a final \$1 million lump payment scheduled for the end of this year. Some of those funds were used to hire a consulting firm, Petroglyphs on the Rio Grande, which is gathering feedback from villagers as it develops a strategic plan.

The challenge will be how to implement the economic diversification community members have said they'd like to see take shape, including a combination of agriculture, light manufacturing, outdoor recreation and tourism. Backcountry skills like hunting, fishing and horseback riding could all be converted into small-scale, ecotourism enterprises with minimal resources and training, Gallegos says.

Elmer Salazar, the co-owner of Petroglyphs, says the plan will "encompass all of these ideas and will reflect in large measure what the leadership is saying they want to be when they grow up, though a sense of ownership on behalf of villagers will be the most critical piece."

"There's a real passion about the quality of the air, water and maintaining the culture and social fabric," he adds.

Sen. Cisneros, who entered public service after retiring from 32 years in Questa's mine, shares Gallegos' measured optimism. Both officials say they're also hoping to connect local landowners to options for redeveloping agricultural properties to meet new market demands.

"The key," Cisneros says, "is to find a marketable product, crops that are suitable for the area, that are high-demand and high-value."

All those components will be key to counteracting the allure of short-term profits from selling off water rights to thirsty companies and municipalities downstream, he says.

Another local working on making high-demand, high-value industries viable is Ceilidh Creech. She says she fell in love with the area around Questa several years back when she'd make getaways from work at a uranium enrichment facility in Eunice, N.M. Now she lives in Amalia, a verdant hamlet north of Questa near the confluence of two creeks swollen during spring runoff.

Creech's efforts began with an approach far from agriculture when Portal Locks, a cybersecurity company she's a partner in, tried to apply for a \$2 million U.S. Department of Agriculture loan to set up a manufacturing operation in Questa. That fell through last month when the Kit Carson Electric Cooperative in Taos, which had offered to sponsor the loan, deemed the company's financial projections "unrealistic," according to a report in the *Taos News*.

Creech responded by turning her attention to a different growth enterprise already thriving in her backyard.

A local strain of hops has proliferated like a weed in the region for millennia, Creech says, alongside a variety of Spanish garlic and herbs with medicinal uses like osha root and Spanish oregano. With the craft beer industry flourishing and a sustained consumer interest in alternative medicine, Creech and others say there's good potential for Questa to capitalize on both if the community can leverage the proper resources and strategy.

Local and state officials envision setting up a malting facility and sowing what are now alfalfa fields with barley, wheat and local hops so Questa can position itself as a farm-to-factory supplier for the craft beer industry. Gallegos says hemp also could be a viable cash crop, though he says he was disappointed to see Gov.

Martinez veto recent legislation to research the potential of the plant for industrial purposes.

Research has shown hemp to be effective for environmental remediation, Gallegos says, and that's something Questa could use as the village recovers from a hundred years of mining contamination.

"We could also try it here for the oils, the seeds, the fiber, all that stuff."

However, he adds, new economic development won't take off here unless community members feel like they truly have a stake in the outcomes. Villagers warily eye the effects of tourism on other places, Gallegos says, fearing increased costs of living and displacement by transplants who aren't always attune to local cultures and traditions.

"Santa Fe was a cozy, small little place, and people who used to live there are now living 15 miles outside of town in a trailer court because they sold their land," Gallegos says. "To slowly grow, we can handle that, but if you're going to put an impact of even 1,000 new people, that would be a shock."

Villagers want to make sure they face the future on their own terms, he says.

"It would be nice to have your child go off to college and be able to come back and do business here or make a living here without having the struggles. That's what we're here to do for the next five to 10 years: struggle to make a better community, make it welcoming, so our kids can come back and reinvest in their town."

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