

## 'If You Want a Job, Come to Vernal'

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After the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded and sank off the coast of Louisiana in 2010, killing 11 workers and causing the worst marine oil spill in history, Vernal resident Mike Mold flew to Louisiana to do his own investigation of the disaster's cause.

He wasn't there by invitation or because of some odd curiosity. He was there as an instructor from the [Uintah Basin Applied Technology College](#) (UBATC) in Vernal, where he teaches workers in the oil and gas industry.

"I went down there on my own dime because, being a well control instructor, you are always interested in what went wrong in such disasters," says Mold. Although he is licensed to teach sub-sea well control, Mold also teaches how to prevent on-land well control and how to prevent well-head disasters. Oil and gas companies from across the globe send their production teams to his intense classes.

The UBATC is home to one of the nation's only publicly-owned, state-of-the-art well control simulators, and the school has proven to be one of the Uintah Basin's many success stories. In 2013, some 5,700 students from 160 companies received training at the UBATC, and more than 3,700 of those students were from the petroleum or transportation industries.

"It's great when you can't find a place to park at the UBATC because of all the oil and gas trucks lined up in the parking lot," says former UBATC President Paul Hacking.

The success of the applied technology college and associated Utah State University satellite campus is a reflection of the beehive-like activity that is taking place in Vernal and the Uintah Basin.

"If you want a job, come to Vernal," says Tammie Lucero, [Uintah County economic development director](#). "Our average wage is higher than the state's average wage."

Lucero doesn't like to call the Basin's growth a "boom" because with every boom there can be a bust. But there's a frenzy of development taking place in the Basin nonetheless. Traditional energy development, unconventional development, commercial and residential construction, retail development—it's all happening in Vernal.

Lucero says people are calling her every day, trying to figure out what is going on in the Basin. Some of that interest is related to the energy industry, she concedes, but not all of it. "When we first started attending the International Council of Shopping Centers retail conference with EDCUtah in Las Vegas many years ago, nobody knew who we were," she reflects. "As time has gone on, our community and our name are on the map, and people are searching us out for all kinds of economic development."

For example, she says the grand opening of a new retail store in the Basin generated one third of store's annual sales goal in just one month. Although she can't name the store or the sales total, Lucero cites the store's success as just one example of numerous successful restaurant and retail openings in the Basin.

Further, she says much of the non-energy interest in the Basin is related to travel and tourism. The county is aggressively marketing Dinosaur National Monument and its "Wall of Bones" along with the area's state parks and many other recreational opportunities. "We have world-class bike trails and fishing in the Basin," says Lucero. "Bike Magazine even suggested Vernal's bike trails are as good as Moab's. We're a diamond in the rough."

Last week the county opened a new ATV trail that begins at [Steinaker State Park](#) and intertwines with a plethora of other ATV trails in the county. County Commissioner Mike McKee says it took eight years to work out the details with stakeholders such as the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, state parks and private land owners and bring the new trail to fruition.

Lucero believes Uintah County's economic growth wouldn't be nearly so robust if it didn't have the opportunity to offer enterprise zone tax credits to companies for hiring new employees and for paying 125 percent of the state's average wage. The Governor's Office of Economic Development cites enterprise zones as areas identified by local elected and economic development officials and designated by the state. Under the program, certain types of businesses locating to or expanding in the zone may claim state income tax credits.

"Because we are able to offer Enterprise Zone tax credits many businesses have stayed and grown in the Basin that might otherwise have moved their operations [out of the state], and we wouldn't have nearly as many good paying jobs here," she continues. "This program is important to our community and has helped us encourage our local companies to stay and be vibrant here."

Lucero describes the organization of the new, seven-county Eastern Utah Economic Development Coalition as another exciting development that will help shape the region economically. The coalition includes Daggett, Duchesne, Uintah, Carbon, Emery, Grand and San Juan Counties and a variety of state leaders. The coalition's first goal is to boost economic development in the eastern part of the state by working on projects collectively and by avoiding cumbersome regulations. "This seven-county Eastern Utah Economic Development Coalition is working on some big, big things for all of those counties," says Lucero. "Everything is on the

table. A lot of our projects are being kept quiet for now, but this is an exciting development that will help all of the counties. The coalition is a fantastic group that means business and we are looking to find funding to do things that will help each other."

Of course, she says, not everything that goes on in Emery County could affect Daggett County, but by working collectively all of the counties will benefit in the long term, especially regarding tourism and recreation.

Certainly, energy production and distribution is a big part of what keeps the Uintah Basin economy humming, but Lucero is quick to point out that government, civic and business leaders in the region have worked hard to diversify the economy and the fruits of those labors are evident in many areas. And despite a lot of misinformation that often dominates the news, she says the energy companies and environmental concerns are finding ways to work together to protect the natural resources while responsibly developing Utah's natural resources.