

Published November 08 2009

OUR VIEW: west N.D. needs east's help

The valley should do what it can to help the boom in western North Dakota resound. And what the valley can do is a lot.

"The news is starting to come fast and furious out of North Dakota, there is almost too much news to report," reports Million Dollar Way, a blog devoted to the oil industry.

Bill Powers, editor of Powers Energy Investor, agrees. "The Bakken Shale formation of the Williston Basin, which stretches from North Dakota into Saskatchewan, is quickly gaining recognition as the largest and most economically robust shale play in North America," Powers wrote last week.

The boom echoing across western North Dakota is like nothing the state has ever seen. Grand Forks and the Red River Valley stand to benefit as well, as oil-tax revenues enrich the state's General Fund, local contractors profit from their western operations and UND helps train the region's petroleum engineers.

All of which suggests that the valley should do what it can to help the boom resound. And what the valley can do is a lot.

Last week, The Chamber's Business News Advisory Board talked about western North Dakota's growth and how the valley can help that growth along. The first thing valley residents can do is learn more about what's happening, participants agreed.

Consider:

** North Dakota now is the fourth-leading oil producing state, having surpassed Oklahoma some months ago and Louisiana more recently. To move past No. 3, California, North Dakota's production will have to triple; but industry insiders say that's likely to happen.

After all, production has more than doubled just since 2005, going from 2.8 million barrels a month to more than 7 million barrels a month today.

"California, here we come," the Minot Daily News editorialized.

** Pipeline capacity having already been exceeded, oil producers are shipping oil via railroad cars. Several multimillion-dollar rail terminals already have opened to make the transfers.

** In August, Halliburton broke ground on a \$20 million expansion of its oil-industry support facility in Williston, N.D. Williston, for its part, remains critically short of housing and is engaged in a number of home-construction initiatives.

It's hard to overstate the stress this growth is putting on the infrastructure of the western part of the state. Consider that it takes about 800 to 1,000 truck visits to open a new well; that the number of truck movements around the oil-producing counties now numbers into the tens of thousands a year; and that a lot of this traffic takes place on dirt roads, and you can start to see the problems.

Dust, roads, housing and water — oil wells measure their demand for water in the millions of gallons — all remain critical needs.

Valley business owners and other leaders should go see the growth and the challenges for themselves, the Business News Advisory Board suggested. A series of charter bus tours might be one way of making that happen.

Then when western North Dakota lawmakers present their legitimate needs to the Legislature, valley leaders and lawmakers should listen with a sympathetic ear.

After all, all of North Dakota benefits when a key region such as the west prospers. And when the time comes for eastern communities to make their needs known, western-area lawmakers will remember favorably the valley's outreach, support and goodwill.

— Tom Dennis for the Herald

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