

# Shifting the burden of “collateral damage”

*Community Development Plan aims to protect landowners while reducing conflict with gas industry.*

*by Peggy Utesch, Grand Valley Citizens Alliance member, New Castle*

While natural gas drilling is bringing money and jobs to Garfield County and helps many local businesses to grow and thrive, other segments of the community and economy are experiencing negative impacts as development rapidly expands.

Many of the gas drilling companies in the area have treated landowners poorly, a situation which has created tension and conflict among an industry focused on rapid expansion, mineral owners seeking to develop their holdings, and landowners who feel like collateral damage in the race to profits.

This climate of contention, and sometimes open hostility, has played out in a number of public meetings, particularly the 2005 Valentine’s Day hearing on Rep. Kathleen Curry’s (D-Gunnison) proposed Surface Damage Compensation Bill. With nearly 300 people attending the hearing, tempers flared as people on both sides of the issue spoke passionately



*A graphic example of what surface landowners can face, this home on Grass Mesa (to the right of the drilling rig in the photo’s middle ground) is an oasis surrounded by bulldozed well pads. Photo courtesy of Peggy Utesch.*

before members of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

Unfortunately, the committee killed the bill, but the issues that need resolution remain. Community uncertainty and frustration continue to be driven by reports of industrial accidents, like the West Divide Creek Seep where 115 million cubic feet of natural gas escaped underground and continues even today to leak to the surface, contaminating water wells and streams.

Garfield County landowners are also frustrated

by the lack of information provided to impacted residents, and are experiencing property value reductions, the inability to secure financing on properties with wells, and loss of quality of life.

## A NEW VISION

Development of Garfield County’s natural gas resources is likely to take more than 20 years – based on estimates by the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. It is of paramount importance for residents and leaders to look at the long-term

impacts that will result from this intense level of projected development – more than 20,000 wells - and seek solutions that benefit both industry and residents.

As with any complex problem, there are valid concerns on both sides. The solution to moving beyond polarization requires abandoning “either/or” thinking. Residents, county government and the municipalities therein must be willing to look at all sides of this issue and proactively work on its difficult aspects. This is how economic diversity, the

landscape, property values and quality of life can be sustained.

Amory Lovins coined the phrase, "Think globally, act locally." The Rifle, Silt, New Castle Community Development Plan (RSNC-CDP) is a ground-breaking project of the Grand Valley Citizens' Alliance (GVCA) that has taken that advice to heart.

When residents of the area between Rifle and New Castle, north of the Colorado River became aware that gas drilling was poised to move into their area, which had experienced no previous development, some community members saw an opportunity.

The RSNC-CDP's approach is to create a partnership between the community and the gas drilling industry that manages the development in a way that protects landowners and addresses their concerns while at the same time reducing landowner conflicts that cost industry time and money. The results are intended to benefit everyone.

In January 2005, GVCA was asked by concerned residents to participate in a public forum to provide information about proposed drilling in the Rifle, Silt, New Castle area north of I-70. At that meeting, area residents expressed interest in a partnership process that could potentially shift the way industry has to date done business in the western Garfield County. The amount of interest was overwhelming.

#### GVCA AS GO-BETWEEN

A community group was formed, and bi-weekly meetings began in February and lasted throughout the summer. Lists of landowner concerns and values were drafted, and from those lists, the Community Development Plan was drafted.

GVCA functioned as the "go between," assisting representatives from the community group who met regularly with Antero Resources to negotiate the details of the plan.

The final draft of the CDP was then shared at a

series of public meetings that took place in November and December 2005. Reception from community members and leaders was, without exception, positive, and several uninvolved industry players also expressed interest.

#### PROACTIVE, REALISTIC STEPS

Much has been written about "best practices" in the gas field. The Community Development Plan uses the term Responsible Development, which is the value around which it was built.

The recommendations made in the RSNC-CDP are proactive and realistic steps that can be implemented to create a new model for how industry and communities can work together. Through the use of best practices and state of the art technology, many if not most of the negative impacts associated with natural gas development can be mitigated.

The key component of the plan's ability to succeed is community participation. A cornerstone of the plan is the creation of

a community board which will manage the plan and create an ongoing relationship with the drilling operators in their area.

"You must be present to win," and we believe that the RSNC-CDP can succeed because it is a partnership between potential adversaries who have come together to create a new vision and a new way of doing business. It represents industry working with the community to define a development process that addresses a larger scope of impacts while also allowing the community to better understand industry's needs and goals.

The current climate of contention benefits no one, and it must change in order for there to be progress. Whether the plan will be successful is an unknown, but rather than taking the same tried path which has consistently led to failure, industry and community are invited to move beyond the limitations of what they think is possible in order to create the future they envision.