

# OPINION: GUEST COLUMNS (/OPINION/GUEST-COLUMNS)

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## Commissioner Debbie Bell: Investing in Fremont County

POSTED: 05/04/2018 04:52:41 PM MDT

Our shared history is rich with traditional industry here in Fremont County. Our lives were steeped in the oil wells and rooted in the coal mines of home.

In fact, I had a conversation just last week with some folks about the immense pride we take in our history. Longtime residents usually can point to fathers, grandfathers, husbands, sons — or all four — who served their community well with entire careers in these industries.

Resource extraction operations continue today in Fremont County but have significantly declined during the past few decades. We were not immune to the boom-and-bust cycles that naturally occur in the oil and mining industries. Unfortunately, 150 years of such activities left a legacy of land and water impacted by petroleum and other hazardous substances. Today, these properties are known as "brownfields."

Once cleaned up and restored to a pristine state, these lands have unlimited potential for redevelopment into other businesses, industries, or even homes.

Fremont County and its partners just received the incredible news that we received a three-year, \$600,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to assess about 20 priority sites around the county to recycle those properties for new and productive uses. We were one of only three grants awarded in the State of Colorado, and we received the largest grant the EPA offers!

The EPA offers the grants to allow local communities to clean up and reinvest in these properties to increase our local tax base, facilitate job growth, utilize existing infrastructure, take development pressures off of undeveloped, open land, and both improve and protect the environment.

Locally, potential project sites might once have hosted mining for gold, iron, gypsum, coal, or uranium, leaving behind abandoned mines, ore mills, gravel pits, electrical transformers and unpermitted dump sites. Industrial facilities here once included smelters, oil refineries, goods manufacturing, and a coal-fired power plant along the Arkansas River Corridor. Additional dangers include asbestos and lead painting in old hotels and other structures right here at home.

Sites suitable for project properties are situated inside city limits of both Cañon City and Florence, as well as unincorporated Fremont County. The two cities have joined the county to form the Fremont County Coalition to perform assessment activities at priority brownfield sites to strengthen and diversify the local economy. This grant will support individual community visions while simultaneously building on the success of other projects.

We have a history of working collaboratively with the cities in Fremont County, and we believe this latest alliance also will reap great rewards for the entire county. In addition, we are working very closely with the Fremont Economic Development Corp., especially Office Manager Diana Armstrong, who did the heavy lifting in pulling together our grant application.



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Debbie Bell

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Each of our Coalition partners has created a list of brownfield target areas and known potential priority brownfield sites. Examples include the Arkansas River corridor, downtown Cañon City, and historical downtown Florence.

Perhaps most importantly, the Coalition will work closely together with property owners to implement this grant. Participation will be voluntary only; no one will be forced to join in this redevelopment effort.

But it is difficult to understand why a property owner might turn down the chance to share in this grant and the opportunities it affords. Many owners are in a holding pattern while trying to figure out what dangers might lie on any given piece of property. This is a starting point, an open invitation to discover information that can only help landowners in the future.

Because we did just receive notification of the grant award, we have much work to do with our EPA liaison before we can begin implementation. Funds will start flowing in October, and we will hit the ground running at that time. Meanwhile, anyone who is interested in more information or the possibility of participating may contact me directly, and I will funnel the request to the appropriate party.

Many thanks to the EPA for accepting our grant application and funding us to the fullest extent. But even more, we owe a deep gratitude to our Coalition partners for joining us in this effort to move Fremont County forward into a more positive, prosperous future.

*Debbie Bell is the Fremont County Commissioner for District 2. She can be reached at [debbie.bell@fremontco.com](mailto:debbie.bell@fremontco.com) (<mailto:debbie.bell@fremontco.com>).*

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