

Spa Town Fights to Keep Job Sources Flowing

Two Economic Pillars of Hot Springs, S.D.—a Veterans' Hospital and a Water Park—Are Under Threat

By **JOE BARRETT**

HOT SPRINGS, S.D.—For more than a century, this Black Hills town has been defined by two things: natural springs that make the Fall River feel as warm as a bath, and convalescing veterans, first drawn here by the healing waters.

Now, two pillars of the town's economy—a 106-year-old Veterans Affairs hospital and an even older spring-fed water park and spa—are under threat.

The city is fighting a 15-month-old plan to close the VA hospital, which employs almost 10% of the population. And voters will decide Tuesday if the city should buy Evans Plunge—an outdated but still impressive swimming spot—to ensure it stays open year-round for locals and tourists alike.

A Tour of a Black Hills Town

Evans Plunge

Bathers enjoyed the naturally warm, spring-fed water at the Plunge, which some believe possesses healing properties. It was rebuilt as a water park in the 1970s.

Many communities across the country faced the loss of key job engines during the recession. Hot Springs—with its mix of family-friendly attractions and veterans-care facilities—did just fine. But as other places crawl out of their economic holes, this town of 3,700 faces an uncertain future.

"It would be devastating to the community" for the VA to leave, says Mayor Don DeVries, and buying the Plunge to keep it open year-round "is a great opportunity," even though he admits the plan has only a 50-50 chance of passage.

In the summer of 2011, Hot Springs had reason to be optimistic. The city had installed its first administrator, charged with rationalizing city departments and coordinating with regional groups to promote nearby attractions—including a museum on the site of a huge mammoth find and Wind Cave National Park—that make the town a summer tourist magnet.

But that fall, the town was thrown a curve. The aging owners of Evans Plunge, a natural pool fed by 13 springs that pump out 5,000 gallons of 87-degree water a minute, said they would close the business in the winter to save money and keep trying to sell it.

The Plunge, built in 1890 as a healing bath house, made the town one of the first tourist destinations in the Black Hills. But the steaming, mineral-rich waters have been tough on the buildings that have housed it, causing two to rot in place over the years, said Vicki Hudson, manager of the Plunge.

"Welcome to the 1970s," Ms. Hudson said to a recent visitor to her wood-paneled office in the current cinder-block building. Around that time, new owners reinvented the Plunge as a water park—a hit in an era when such things were a novelty. It still draws 80,000 visitors a year, Ms. Hudson said.

The winter closings have hit local bathers and businesses. "It's slowed down business," said Cindy Wedekind, co-owner of Dale's Family Restaurant, directly across from The Plunge. "But I'm surviving."

A much bigger blow came in December 2011, when the VA announced it planned to close the Hot Springs facility, which employs 350 people. "It felt like we were kicked in the stomach," said Mayor DeVries.

The 1907 building—its long wings radiating from a circular courtyard—was built for respiratory and tuberculosis patients, said Stephen DiStasio, director of the VA Black Hills Health Care System. "In those days, treatment was rest and exposure to fresh air. It wasn't a health-care building."

Veterans would be better off in smaller facilities closer to where they live, he said. Programs for post-traumatic stress disorder, for example, would work better in apartment-like settings an hour away in Rapid City, which has greater employment and health-care options.

Four hundred residents fought back, questioning the VA's cost estimates and arguing Hot Springs should be used as a demonstration of PTSD treatment in rural settings.

"They originally put the hospital in a calm and healing environment. That really hasn't changed," said Rich Gross, who led a delegation to Washington in January to plead their case to the head of the VA.

Meanwhile, as groups weighed bids for the Plunge, including a school and a motorcycle club, a citizens group last December negotiated to buy it for \$1.6 million in the city's name. In January, City Council President Carl Atchley said he sensed he didn't have the votes to approve the sale, so he tabled the measure. The next day, he started a petition to put it on Tuesday's ballot.

Joe Lux, a former mayor, is part of a private group that hopes to buy the Plunge if the city plan falls through. He aims to keep it open year-round, but says it is a challenge to get the pricing right.

Cristin Stewart, co-owner of the Vault, a downtown bar and burger joint, said the city will survive. People think "the town is really going to dry up and blow away, and it's not—but it's scary for sure," she said.

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