

## **Group aims to revitalize downtown Questa, starting with donated building**

**Matthew van Buren | Posted: Monday, January 9, 2012 12:00 am**

Political and business leaders from the village of Questa are hopeful that the recent donation of the former Centinel Bank branch to the Questa Economic Development Fund can help revitalize Questa's downtown.

The building, located near the intersection of State Road 522 and Highway 38, served as Centinel Bank's Questa branch for three decades before it was closed last winter.

Centinel sought proposals from different organizations regarding the building's future use; Centinel CEO Rebeca Romero-Rainey wrote in an email to The Taos News that the bank wanted to "continue to invest in and help the community of Questa" by donating the building.

"We had five different proposals — all of which represented great ways to help the community and local nonprofit organizations," she wrote.

Romero-Rainey declined to identify the other organizations that submitted proposals but said the Economic Development Fund's mission and vision for the property impressed the board.

"The Fund's board of trustees claims that the location is 'ideal' to become a focal point for downtown Questa, utilizing the building for a visitor's center and the board's offices," a release from Centinel states. "The surrounding property will contain a gazebo, new lighting and benches to provide for concerts, fairs and farmer's markets."

The Questa Economic Development Fund was created at the end of 2008 as a way for Chevron Mining to "help the village prepare for its economic well-being far beyond the likely life span of the mine," according to a September 2008 letter to the village from Questa Mine Manager Roy Torres. The company proposed contributing \$320,000 per year to the Fund for eight years, plus an additional \$1 million at the end of eight funding cycles, to help bolster and diversify Questa's economy.

For more information about Fund expenditures and other contributions to the village from the Questa Mine, read the next two installments in this series.

Development Fund Executive Director Bobby Ortega, who has also worked for Centinel Bank longer than 30 years, expounded on the Fund's vision for the future uses of the 1,300-square-foot building and surrounding property. The building contains two offices, a lobby, a fireproof teller area and a vault where records could be stored.

Ortega said besides accommodating the Fund's offices, the building could be used as a meeting

space or house a revitalized chamber of commerce. He said the building's central location, near Questa's traffic light, would also lend itself to a visitor information center.

Ortega said the building could use some minor, deferred maintenance, such as painting and landscaping, but that it is structurally sound.

"I think the roof is in good shape," he said. "Now we just need furnishings."

Romero-Rainey declined to tell The Taos News the building's appraised value but said its utilities average about \$150 "in the most expensive months."

Ortega said the Fund would like to see the outdoor area around the building used for farmers markets, outdoor concerts and other activities that would tie into Fiestas and draw visitors to town. He said the Fund is in discussions with a neighboring landowner about purchasing an adjacent property as well.

Village Councilor Evelyn Ortega-Coggins helped create the Development Fund's proposal to the bank. She said the donated building would be a good place to start when highlighting the village, including local businesses and artists; she also said the Development Fund has the money behind it to carry out its plans.

"This was a very good investment for the community," she said.

Ortega said the Fund board will meet later this month to discuss the future management of the building, which may include entering a contract with the village to staff a visitor center or collaborating with other organizations. He said a visitor center has the potential to get tourists to stop in Questa, giving staffers the opportunity to sell the community.

"It really does have to be a partnership," Ortega-Coggins said, adding that the building could end up a great centerpiece for the village.

Fund board member Gordon Robinson said thoughtful planning can help Questa maximize the building's value to the community.

"It's amazing how many travelers pass through Questa," he said.

Robinson said the donation also gives the board motivation to continue working toward economic development.

"This building has been a big spark," he said.

Former Questa mayor and member of the Development Fund board Malaquías Rael Jr. said he sees a lot of potential in the building. He said the economy may continue to suffer now, but Questa needs to continue to plan for the future and work to diversify its economy.

“Nothing lasts forever — not even the bad times,” he said.