ID Town Seeks To Lure Gun, Ammo Makers

Nicholas K. Geranios, Associated Press

POTLATCH, Idaho (AP) — This small community in the forested, western foothills of the Rocky Mountains was created as a company town to house workers for the nation's largest white pine sawmill, and its tidy homes and straight, tree-lined streets are a testament to its planners.

But the town has slumbered since the Potlatch Lumber Co. mill closed in 1981, and was searching for an economic future when an ammunition maker decided last year to move its operations from the liberal Seattle area to this more conservative region.

The move by PNW Arms was like a signal flare to business and political leaders in the town of 800 people, who were in the process of trying to determine what industry would be best to pursue.

"We were in the middle of doing our marketing plan at the time and decided that firearms is the niche we would recommend," said Gary White of Kennewick, Wash., a business marketing consultant who is helping develop the town's pitch to gun makers.

Potlatch, they decided, would go from timber town to gun town. It would try to lure firearms and ammunition makers, and plans also called for hunting-themed housing and retail development.

"It will help draw some out-of-towners and out-of-staters," Mayor David Brown said.

Potlatch's efforts piggyback on a national trend in which firearms-friendly states are trying to pry gun and ammo makers out of the Midwest and Northeast, where some states have more restrictive gun laws.

The Idaho Department of Commerce is making firearms manufacturers a recruiting priority. The state recently passed a law that protects firearms makers from liability lawsuits or excessive regulation, White said.

"Lots of states are anti-firearms states," White said. "That is what Idaho is playing against, positioning itself as a firearms friendly state."

Firearms are a $3.8 billion industry that employs 90,000 people in the United States. The industry includes household names like Remington, Winchester, Smith & Wesson and Colt, but also more than 1,000 smaller companies.

"There are a number of states in the South and out West that have pitched to have companies relocate or start businesses in their states," said Lawrence Keane, spokesman for the National Shooting Sports Foundation, the industry trade group.

South Dakota has had some success in luring companies, and states like Alabama, Montana, Idaho and Arizona have also rolled out the welcome mat, Keane said.

Many firearms companies have long been headquartered in states like Massachusetts and Connecticut, where the political climate has turned more hostile to firearms. Massachusetts, for example, has passed laws limiting the number of guns people can buy. Several states have passed or proposed laws calling for their gun makers to "micro-stamp" handguns with a mark on the firing pin that would allow bullet casings to be identifiable by gun owner.

No such fears in Idaho, a conservative state where firearms are a daily part of many people's lives.

"The regulatory environment in Idaho is friendly to guns and ammunition and we thought we could take this and run with it," said B.J. Swanson, head of economic development for Latah County.

Potlatch went public in April with its come-hither pitch to gun makers.

"We've had two nibbles already and we haven't even tried," Swanson said.

Swanson acknowledged that gun manufacturers would not be welcomed everywhere. Even in Latah County, they might face opposition 15 miles away in liberal Moscow, where the University of Idaho is based.

"In Potlatch, they would be welcomed with open arms," Swanson said. "I have not heard a single person in Potlatch saying, 'We don't want them here.'"

White agreed: "If we proposed this in Seattle or Portland, I'm sure it would be entirely different. For Potlatch, Idaho, this makes absolute sense."

The idea is to create a niche, like guns, and then recruit a cluster of companies to fill it, White said. In nearby Dayton, Wash., White is helping develop an organic food retail and business park to cash in on the tourists who visit the farm town.

Potlatch was created in 1905 to provide homes for the 500 workers at the Potlatch Lumber Co. mill. Nineteen of the homes built by the company are on the National Register of Historic Places, and City Hall used to be the mill headquarters. The mill closed in 1981, and no major business activity has emerged to replace the lumber jobs.

But Potlatch didn't shrivel up. Located a short distance from the university towns of Moscow and Pullman, Wash., Potlatch became a bedroom community for workers and students at both schools. Busy State Highway 6 serves as the main street through the town, and the small business community actually has trouble finding workers, said Dale Spring, owner of Dale's Wagon Wheel Bar & Grill.

Spring wonders where the workers would come from for any new firearms factory.

"There's no labor force," he said.

Many Potlatch residents work at the universities, or at one of the thriving private sector employers in the Moscow-Pullman area, he said.

Local economic development leaders believe good-paying jobs will draw workers.

The lure for manufacturers is the former lumber mill site, of which 26 acres is set aside for firearms and related companies, White said. The mill site is currently without buildings, but has nearby utilities, is flat and the town has plenty of water and sewer capacity, Swanson said.

Nationally, there has been a big jump in the popularity of target shooting, largely the result of a slew of television programs on that subject, White said. They expect Potlatch's plan to appeal to some of those people, he said.

The marketing effort is funded by Potlatch Corp, which still owns the mill site, by local utility Avista, and by local city and county governments.

Town leaders were careful to use the word "firearms'" in the pitch, Mayor Brown said. "Firearms sounds more friendly than gun park," Brown said.

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