

Geothermal development possible for Benton area?

Mike Bodine, Inyo Register, 3-2-10

A renewable energy resource development could bring new life to the Utu Utu Gwaitu Benton Paiute Tribe and the town itself, which is an active geothermal region.

The Tribe was recently awarded a \$200,000 grant for a Geothermal Power Feasibility Study from the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development.

Linda Amelia, project manager, and Adora Saulque, tribal secretary, said by phone Monday that this grant money could be the beginning of major developments for the small town. Amelia added that, "if all goes well," the Tribe and the town could be looking at sites to develop more housing to accommodate so many new jobs being created.

They acknowledged this could be a pipe dream, but the Tribe has money to conduct the studies and will receive some free advice from the feds on what will be best suited for economic development.

Saulque wanted it to be clear that this money is to study the potential of the geothermal activities and that there has been "no commitment" to any projects other than the study.

Amelia said the owners of the Benton Hot Springs Bed and Breakfast, Bill and Diane Bramlette, are also working with the Tribe to develop and encourage growth in the town. The B&B and hot tubs are located adjacent to the reservation.

Tribal Chairman Billie "Jake" Saulque said in a press release that "the vision" of the Benton Economic Development Corporation is to create "green" jobs for tribal members.

"This federal grant will allow our Tribe to take the first step toward finding out if there are geothermal renewable resources below our reservation land that will promote the creation of jobs for our members," Saulque said.

Amelia said that there is a large pot of possibilities that could open up if geothermal energy potential is there. She explained that the closer the hot water is to the surface, the easier it is to access and the cheaper it is to make use of it. The easier the geothermal source is to develop, the faster the growth.

Amelia and Adora Saulque shared the idea of potentially opening a health and wellness center utilizing the "healing waters" and the peace and quiet that Benton provides. Amelia said it would not be a pampering spa, but a center focused on healthy eating, medicinal herbs and teaching how to take care of the body. She added that the corporation is working with a "world-renowned" author/doctor and healing specialist that is very interested in the development of the area as a healing center.

There are other possibilities, like hydroponics, aqua-farming and green house growing, Amelia added. Roger Knight and Robert Just, staff engineers for the Department of Energy and Mineral Development, will assist in monitoring and assessing the geothermal potential.

Amelia added that the Interior Department will also be giving the tribe free advice on what the best use of the resource could be.

She said that there will many future meetings to discuss the process, the findings and eventually what development the community would like to see.