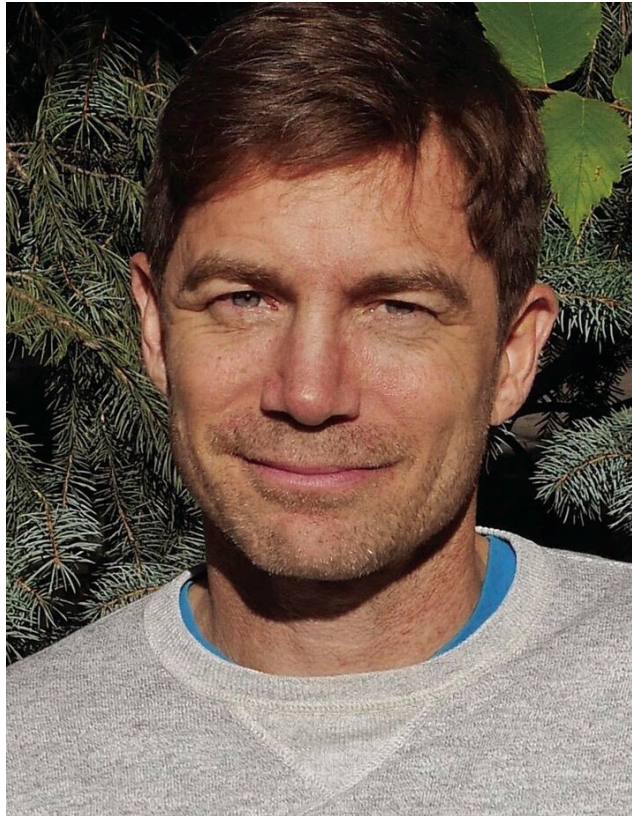


Guest Column: Billionaire mine owner leaves a tiny town in the lurch

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Only about 100 people live in Somerset in western Colorado, a former coal company town squeezed into a narrow valley. A state highway and railroad tracks crowd on one side, the North Fork of the Gunnison River on the other.

Some say there's charm in the town's narrow streets and funky houses with affordable rent. What's more, there's no government except for a water district, though that's what a recent controversy is all about.

For over a century, Somerset has been dominated by a parade of big money interests, from Kaiser Steel to US Steel and now by billionaire Bill Koch, younger brother to the Koch brothers, known for financing far right politics.

De facto government has long been from the coal companies, which provided water and even a store. In the early 1960s, mine owner at the time, US Steel, sold the houses to residents. But Somerset never created a

town government, and minimal oversight comes from Gunnison County, two hours away by way of a twisting highway or dirt road over a pass.

The town's water always remained a coal company's responsibility until this year. On Jan. 27, Koch's mine president, Mike Ludlow, sent a letter to the Somerset Water Board: "Oxbow Mining is hereby providing you with a six months' notice of its intention to terminate the Agreement (contract of 1962) effective on July 31, 2021."

The property under the plant and water rights from the North Fork River, however, will revert to Koch's gas fracking company, Gunnison Energy.

How can tiny Somerset - its finances shaky and residents on the poorer side – possibly shoulder the burden? Maintenance of the aging water treatment plant costs \$7,000 monthly, and water from the plant consistently fails state-monitored water quality tests.

Saddled with finding a solution is lifetime Somerset resident John Mlakar, Somerset's water manager. He says the town has \$71,000 on hand, which isn't nearly enough to build a new, \$200,000 plant that would meet state standards and sift harmful compounds from the water.

One of those compounds is bromide. When mixed with chlorine used to kill bacteria in a water treatment plant, it causes total trihalomethanes, a cancer-causing mixture.

Bromide occurs naturally but concentrates after being stirred up by mining or natural gas drilling. Water tests by a Koch employee in 2018 found that bromide originated well above the West Elk mine, but below where Koch's Gunnison Energy and others have natural gas wells.

Meanwhile, new people have been moving into the town's 50 or so houses as retired coal miners move out. One champion of the reviving town is Terry Commander, who heads the town's fire district. "The dynamics of the town are changing for the better," she says.

You might think that Koch's corporation, the state of Colorado or the county would be willing to help Somerset deal with its crisis. So far, no one has stepped up.

Gunnison County Commissioner Roland Mason says dealing with "rights of way" in distant Somerset has always been a chore. Perhaps that's why a visitor to the town notices abandoned cars parked willy-nilly and piles of junk that look as old as the town itself.

Yet Mason acknowledges that Somerset has been a valuable asset: "Ten years ago, 18 percent of our budget was from the severance tax when the mines were going." That amounted to \$11.7 million of the county's \$65 million budget. "The county had to rearrange their budget significantly when the mines closed," Mason adds.

Impacts, however, were mostly felt in nearby Delta County, which for 60 years provided everything from schools, hospital and housing for hundreds of coal miners and their families. Delta County received some

payment for its services, but they were never on the scale of Gunnison County, which could claim Somerset as its cash cow.

Koch's mine closed after a fire in 2013, but Somerset still has one active coal mine, West Elk Mine, which sent \$1.2 million direct severance taxes to the town and county of Gunnison in 2019 alone. Another \$497,000 indirect severance grant paid for six solar arrays on Gunnison county buildings.

Mlakar says he's happy to make the town's pitch to Gunnison commissioners: "We need their help. I've been in the new Gunnison jail, though not for illegal reasons. That place is a palace."

He compares prosperous Gunnison County to his own tight budget. "I make \$905 per month. My house is paid off and money pays for food, heat and my water. You push the price of water any higher, and I'm broke, I gotta leave."

Dave Marston is the publisher of Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He went to school years K-12 with kids from Somerset.