

Bill gets new hotel, diner

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BILL -- A 111-room motel and 24-hour diner opened here this month.

Lodging Enterprises Inc. built the facility on a contract with the Union Pacific Railroad, which will use many rooms to house rail service crews and other employees. But a handful of rooms will be available for the public, along with food from Penny's Diner, Lodging Enterprises President Bill Burgess said.

"We have no idea what demand there may be, if any, in Bill, Wyoming," he said. However, he anticipates travelers and workers in the Powder River Basin energy industries -- not to mention the influx of Thunder Basin National Grassland hunters each fall -- will take advantage of the newest dining option between Douglas and Wright.

While the motel and diner are owned and operated by Lodging Enterprises, rooms are under contract to the Union Pacific. Most engineers and conductors who drive trains through the basin's busy coal mines for loading are based in Douglas and return home after each shift. Those who need lodging are crews out of Morrill, Neb., handling the trains between that point and Bill.

Mark Davis, UP spokesman, said the company is averaging about 70 trains per day on the corridor between South Morrill and Shawnee Junction, which is the gateway to the coal basin.

In November, UP set its best month on record after shipping 17.9 million tons of coal out of the southern basin. The record followed a three-month trend of consistent increases in coal traffic.

The 56 dorm rooms at the UP Bill depot were routinely full, with managers anticipating growing needs as the railroad ships record amounts of coal from the basin. Plans also call for a possible yard expansion which involved tearing down the existing dorms to make way for more offices and crew facilities, Burgess said.

"It's very important for us to look at our crews' quarters and make sure they're getting proper sleep, restful sleep," Burgess said. "The hotel was replaced to help improve quality of life for crews."

Round-the-clock facilities with food availability is critical, he added.

Davis said the company has thoroughly analyzed the southern Powder River Basin operations and has no concrete plans for a yard expansion in 2008. Instead of major new construction of tracks and other infrastructure, UP is focusing on better managing the "ebb and flows" of coal traffic, he said.

"The push for us any more is to look at and really analyze the different processes," Davis said. "How we can increase the train speed, the train numbers, the length, more efficiently through developmental processes verses spending millions in capital and adding track."

Converse County Commissioner Ed Werner said he's glad to see a new motel in the area, but the economic benefits might not be much. Taxes on motel beds are paid to the county tourism board in most cases, and the money is used to promote more visitors. When rooms are under contract to a company, such as the Oak Tree rooms to UP, the taxes won't apply.

"If the railroad has all the rooms under contract, they'll pay absolutely minimal bed taxes," Werner said.

Lodging Enterprises has several similar setups in Rawlins, Green River and Cheyenne. The Bill motel includes down-time areas for train crews to unwind, a fitness center and amenities including refrigerators and microwaves in each room.