

Mission: Controversial

by Anne Krueger

SAN DIEGO - Blackwater USA, a private security firm with hundreds of millions of dollars in government work in Iraq, has polarized the backcountry community of Potrero with a proposal to train its forces on a former chicken and cattle ranch.

The North Carolina-based company, which uses muscular, heavily armed military men to recruit on its Web site, is on the fast track with the county to develop a training center on 824 acres about 45 miles east of San Diego.

Some in Potrero support Blackwater, saying its center will bring jobs and clean up a rundown ranch. Others who live there to escape urban noise and pollution worry about the cracking of gunfire - or worse.

"These people have no interest but war and guns and noise and fighting and tanks," said Harriett Molloy, who moved to Potrero 29 years ago to ease her allergies. "That's who they are."

Potrero's planning group, an advisory body to the county, unanimously approved Blackwater's preliminary proposal in December. Planning group Chairman Gordon Hammers said he believes some of the controversy that's erupted since then is political.

In addition to the drug dealers who don't want more law enforcement around, Hammers said, Blackwater's center is opposed by people "with a liberal bent" who don't like the company's role in Iraq.

Patriots and those who believe the facility will be an economic boost for Potrero support it, he said.

The final decision is up to the county Board of Supervisors. The next step is a public meeting today, where county staff members will present the proposal and take written comments from attendees. Opponents of the project are planning to protest before the meeting.

Hammers said he's never seen so much controversy over a local project in his 37 years in Potrero.

"There's no neutral ground," he said.

A WIDE-RANGING COMPANY

Blackwater USA is described on its Web site as a "professional military, law enforcement, security, peacekeeping and stability operations firm" with five divisions, including a training unit.

The company operates a training facility at its headquarters in Moyock, N.C., and is looking to expand. A Potrero facility would offer a West Coast presence, while another center that just opened near Mount Carroll, Ill., gives the company a foothold in the Midwest.

The Potrero facility would have eight rifle ranges, three pistol ranges, a helipad, four ship simulators and an urban simulation training area. It would serve about 300 students at a time, with about 60 employees. Most students would stay a week in bunkhouses, behind gates that lock each night at 9.

At the Moyock center, men pay \$20,000 for eight weeks of make-or-break training to become an independent contractor for Blackwater. They usually have military backgrounds and a taste for something more lucrative.

Brian Bonfiglio, a Blackwater vice president, said the Potrero site would be used more for training law enforcement than the military.

"We won't be running a boot camp here," he said.

One of the largest private military contractors in Iraq, the company got its business boost after the terrorist attacks on the Navy destroyer Cole in 2000 and on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001.

So much war and reconstruction work in Iraq has been contracted out that there are almost as many independent contractors in the war zone as there are U.S. military forces, according to the Associated Press. Nearly 800 civilians under Pentagon contracts have died there.

In March 2004, four Blackwater contractors were killed and their bodies were burned by mobs in Fallujah, Iraq. Grisly images of their bodies were shown around the world. The families of the men are now suing Blackwater in North Carolina state court, contending the men weren't properly armed or trained.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, has criticized the amount of government money going to contracts with Blackwater and other companies in Iraq and has pushed for more transparency.

At a House hearing in February, Waxman said almost \$4 billion in taxpayer money has been paid for private security services in Iraq.

Independent journalist Jeremy Scahill has written a book about the company titled, "Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army."

Scahill said in an interview that Blackwater trains "a shadow army" at its North Carolina facility, and Potrero residents should ask whether they want that.

"Do you want heavily armed men operating a private military base in your community?" said Scahill, who plans to speak about his book in San Diego next month.

A SIMPLER LIFE

To drivers on state Route 94, Potrero is little more than a spot on the road about an hour's drive east of San Diego. The post office and cafe they whiz past are the heart of the community.

First settled in 1868, Potrero has a mix of trim ranch houses on multiacre lots, a trailer park and dilapidated homes with rusting cars out front.

Many of the town's 850 residents came for a simpler life, a refuge from the big city. Named for the Spanish word for "pasture," Potrero still has meadows by the road, where cows graze.

Blackwater wants to build its training facility, dubbed Blackwater West, on one of those meadows. Although San Diego County is a hub for military operations, including a training center not far from Potrero, there's no private facility in the county on the scale of Blackwater's proposal.

The Potrero property, now in escrow, is a grassy valley surrounded by 600-foot-high hills. About 90 acres are within the Cleveland National Forest, but Blackwater officials said that portion will remain untouched.

The land has been owned by the Charles and Alma Kreutzkamp trust since 1998. Bonfiglio declined to reveal the purchase price. He said the site was chosen for its proximity to San Diego's military bases and offers a training center for local enforcement.

The site was also chosen because the surrounding hills would help contain noise. The training areas would be on the side of the property farthest from the nearest neighbors, Bonfiglio said.

He moved to San Diego County from North Carolina to guide the project through the planning process and to try to assuage residents' concerns. He said the facility would provide new jobs and offer a haven for residents to stay if disaster strikes.

"Change out here for some is a little bit scary," Bonfiglio said. "I don't think we're as big and bad as people make us out to be."

Blackwater USA has supporters and detractors near its headquarters in North Carolina. With a population of about 4,600, Moyock is the largest community in rural Currituck County.

David Palmer, chairman of the Currituck Chamber of Commerce, said Blackwater is the area's largest employer and has been active with the chamber. The company has about 450 employees in North Carolina.

"They try their best to be good corporate neighbors," Palmer said.

When Blackwater brought expansion plans to the town council, some residents complained about traffic and gunfire noise. "Some residents object to it, some could care less," Palmer said.

Lavert Adams, 90, has lived on Puddin Ridge Road, the main street into Blackwater's Moyock facility and a major artery for the area, since 1950. She said the jobs the company has brought are good for the community.

"There's more traffic here, but it don't bother me," she said. "I don't see a thing wrong with (Blackwater) myself. Some people get upset about everything anyway."

Sherry Motes, who lives three miles from the facility, said she's concerned about more gunfire and traffic near her home if Blackwater further expands on its Moyock property.

"They speed, they drive real fast," she said.

Blackwater has approval but no immediate plans to expand in her area.

Carl Bates, mayor of Mount Carroll, Ill., where Blackwater has a new 80-acre facility, said representatives of the company met with the City Council and addressed all concerns about noise and traffic.

"If they do a third of what they say, they're really going to benefit the community," Bates said.

The Illinois facility, which held its first classes this week, will be used to train law enforcement and the military, said Blackwater spokeswoman Anne Tyrrell.

OPPOSITION GROWS

Blackwater's proposed training center in Potrero isn't sitting well with many folks there.

Carl Meyer, a Potrero resident who helped collect more than 300 signatures on a petition opposing Blackwater, said the noise of military training will disrupt the quiet of the rural community.

"We're going to hear shotgun shells going off all day. Who wants to hear that?" he asked. "If we wanted something real loud, we'd all move downtown."

Duncan McFetridge, a Descanso resident who heads the anti-sprawl organization Save Our Forest and Ranchlands, recently held a meeting for opponents of the proposed facility. He showed a movie about military contractors, including Blackwater, called "Iraq For Sale: The War Profiteers."

McFetridge said the training facility would violate the county's planning document for Potrero, which calls for residences on small ranches. (Hammers said the training center would be less disruptive than a residential development.)

"How can you put in mercenary training when there's nothing in the general plan that supports it?" McFetridge asked. "How do you measure use when you have machine guns and helicopters?"

Bonfiglio said Blackwater plans to build berms and use rubber targets and other devices to muffle the gunfire sounds.

He's made inroads with a few Potrero residents. Jim and Luisa Wildey, wearing Blackwater T-shirts as they drank coffee with Bonfiglio at the Potrero Cafe, said the company answered their concerns about traffic.

Jim Wildey, a Potrero resident for more than seven years, said Bonfiglio explained that many students would arrive in vans, lessening the additional traffic.

"We have no problem with the project," he said. "We're satisfied."

Jan Hedlun was elected to Potrero's nine-member planning group in November and joined the group in January, after its initial vote on Blackwater. A resident of Potrero since 1996, she doesn't want the changes she said Blackwater would bring.

"I don't believe that gun ranges and a training facility fits in our community," she said. "It's not what I moved there for."

The Blackwater proposal is one of the first major projects to come under a streamlined review process by the county planning department. It is expected to reduce the time it takes for a project to move through the county's channels from four years to two.

Projects must still have repeated reviews by local planning groups and county staff, said Jeff Murphy, chief of the building division of the county planning department.

If approved by county staff, the project will be voted on by the county Board of Supervisors. Supervisor Dianne Jacob, who represents East County, would not comment on the project because it will come before the board.

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