



THE TAOS NEWS

Named Best U.S. Weekly Newspaper by the Nat'l. Newspaper Assoc. 2007, 2008
Inland Press Foundation Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

My turn

Ranchos group opposes training flights over county

David Maes

The first-time visitor to Taos is struck by its magnificence — majestic Taos mountain, green valleys and brilliant sunsets, all draped with a turquoise- blue sky mantilla.

This Garden of Eden image masks a different reality for the people who live here. Native peoples who have lived here for centuries struggle hard to survive. People are poor. In Taos, it is most difficult to find a job that pays a living wage.

Children of O-ate and De Vargas, whose ancestors settled these valleys in the early 1700s stay on, struggle on. This is our ancestral home. We endure the hardships because we choose to live in this blessed place.

We who have managed to stay are the fortunate ones.

Many of our friends and family members have lost the struggle and been forced to make the heartbreaking sacrifice of selling their precious land and moving away. Judging from recent class reunions, I would estimate that about half of every high school class is forced to leave. Taos simply does not have enough jobs to offer its native sons and daughters. The Ranchos Valley, located four miles south of Taos, is the second-largest concentration of residents in Taos County.

The hardy Spanish settlers of the Ranchos Valley endured harsh winters, years with failing crops, and the isolation of the northern mountains.

The acquisition of today's Southwest as a result of the Mexican-American war brought the new challenge of integrating into the dominant American culture. The harsh reality is that integration is largely controlled by the dominant culture. New Mexico Hispanos, and especially those in Northern New Mexico, were left behind, forgotten as it were. "But, mine are still forgotten people. Pasò por aqu' ..." These words were written by Dr. George I. Sanchez in his groundbreaking study of the plight of New Mexico Hispanos. "Forgotten People" was originally published in 1940.

Dr. Sanchez contended that the U.S. Government had all but ignored the people of New Mexico: "The Spanish-American of New Mexico was left to the mercy of exploiters: merchants, cattle barons, land grabbers, venal politicians — merciless all." Washington's many "war on poverty" programs accomplished little in the way of helping New Mexican Hispanos. "We remain the poorest of the poor," Sanchez wrote. He studied conditions in Taos County and extended his findings statewide, concluding that Spanish-Americans in New Mexico were "stepchildren of a nation."

The general conclusions drawn by Dr. Sanchez 70 years ago, still ring true today. We remain Forgotten People, except, it seems, when the federal government wants something from us.

The dire condition of New Mexico's Hispano population is exaggerated in Taos County.

Of the four major Northern New Mexico towns, only Taos has NO federal or state institutions to support its local economy (the exception is a small UNM branch which only recently opened). Compare if you will, Taos' situation to that of her sister towns in Northern New Mexico:

n Las Vegas has Highlands University, Luna Vocational Technical Institute, the State Hospital, and two school districts (with two administrative staffs).

n Espa-ola has Northern New Mexico College, and is within easy commuting distance of Los Alamos National Laboratory and Santa Fe.

n Santa Fe, our State capitol, has an abundance of state agencies and institutions, and many private and public colleges.

Taos is unique in that it depends almost exclusively on tourism for economic survival.

Tourists travel to Taos not only for its scenery and arts, but also for its peace and tranquility.

In the world of tourism, the perception of flyovers is the same as the reality of flyovers.

It will not matter whether flights take place in remote parts of the county. The mere fact that flyovers would occur will discourage tourism. The question is not if, but how much. Unfortunately, any significant amount would spell calamity for our already fragile economy. Tourism and economic wellbeing are one issue; the other is quality of life.

Residents of Ranchos de Taos value the peace and quiet of our valley, along with the privately held Cristóbal de la Serna Land Grant. This is our ancestral homeland. This land provides us resources and recreation. Peace, quiet, and tranquility are as much a part of this heritage as open spaces and blue skies.

On Thursday, Sept. 23, the Ranchos Neighborhood Association voted to submit comments in opposition to the Air Force's proposed use of Taos County airspace for Osprey and C-130 aircraft low altitude nighttime training flights. The flights pose a serious threat to Ranchos residents' economic wellbeing and our ability to continue living in our ancestral homelands, and consequently threaten the preservation of our culture, and our revered traditions.

David Maes, president, wrote this on behalf of the Ranchos Neighborhood Association. This is an abridged version of a letter sent Oct. 4 to the commander of the Cannon Air Force Base, with copies to U.S. Sens. Tom Udall and Jeff Bingaman, U.S. Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, Taos County and town of Taos.