

Changes made to protect historic properties

By Matthew van Buren

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The Taos Town Council approved changes to the Land Use Development Code in order to allow more architectural styles in the Historic Overlay Zone and give the Historic Preservation Commission more authority.

Long-range planner Matthew Foster told the council the former code was “too limiting” in terms of the architectural styles that were allowed.

The amended ordinance allows for “bungalow/craftsman style” buildings and combinations of architectural styles as allowed by the Historic Preservation Commission. Bungalow/ craftsman- style buildings are defined as structures one to 1.5 stories tall “with low, simple lines and projecting roofs.”

The amended ordinance also allows for more variety in the color of buildings. Pastel and fluorescent colors are prohibited, but the Historic Preservation Commission will have discretion over other colors, as long as a sample of the colors are provided to the town.

The ordinance contains language to protect various “streetscapes,” which include buildings, yard walls and fences within 600 feet of a given property.

It also strengthens rules for preserving “contributing (historic) properties.” Contributing properties’ historic characters and distinctive architectural features must be retained and preserved.

“Fifty percent or more of the original materials must be unrepairable in the written opinion of the code administrator in order to be replaced, provided that the new material matches the old in composition, design, color and texture, and shall not, in any way, damage original parts, features or materials of the building or structure,” the amended ordinance states.

Contributing properties may not be demolished under the new ordinance, which also makes it impossible for property owners to claim “economic hardship” when contributing properties require maintenance or repair. If a distinctive feature must be replaced, “the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and where possible, materials.”

Property owners must document their efforts to replace such features of contributing properties and may only substitute materials if they can show historic materials or skilled labor were unavailable — and only then when they submit “written representation of due diligence” to locate the materials and labor.

The ordinance prohibits chain link fencing, and only wooden garage doors are permitted in a Historic Overlay Zone.

The Historic Preservation Commission has more discretionary powers under the new ordinance, including approving surface materials and textures, finishes, and it will be more than just an advisory body. Its duties are separated from those of the Planning Commission in the revised ordinance, and its decisions will be appealed to the Town Council.

Historic Preservation Commission member and architect Oscar Palacios said the commission wants “teeth,” and he appreciates the language in the new ordinance that gives the commission discretionary authority.

Former town community and economic development director Matt Spriggs also said he believes the revised ordinance will be “much better for everybody involved,” particularly as it allows for different types of architecture as long as they are compatible with the historic character of the area.

“It’s come a long way,” he said. “There’s a great deal of variety in the architecture in our community.”

Mayor Darren Còrdova also said he appreciates the flexibility for which the revisions provide.

“That itself adds to the character that we have,” he said.

The council approved the revisions unanimously. For more information, visit taosgov.com.