

My Turn

Open space: Our best idea

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Taos is a semi-rural community. We see horses and cattle grazing, farmers irrigating their hay fields and harvesting food crops, and we hike and recreate on trails and meandering paths.

Our open spaces create the visual foreground for our majestic Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

This makes Taos a special place.

Open spaces are the scenic gateways into our community and are cherished by Taose-os, and by those who come to visit.

Much of our open space has resided in family lineage for generations, passed down from older to younger generations with the understanding that land is our precious heritage and must be protected and nurtured.

Entering Taos from the north and south, open spaces set the stage for how we experience our community and greet our visitors. The Taos Valley Overlook south of town that is now protected forms one of the most spectacular gateways to any community in America. It is our great “ah-ha” moment as we arrive upon the spectacle of the Rio Grande Gorge and Taos Mountain spread out before us.

Open space is truly ‘our best idea’ and asset but it is vulnerable to rapid change from inappropriate types of development — witness the recent Family Dollar Store development proposed for irrigated agricultural land in El Prado. Development pressures like this often originate from out of town interests who have no understanding or appreciation of our land and heritage.

Integral to our open space heritage is the centuries’ old acequia system, with origins dating from early Pueblo and Hispanic Peoples. Acequias are a vital component of our community’s culture. The open spaces they nourish create a sustainable land and water regime that we are fortunate to have in Taos.

Open space is also critical for the recharge of ground water and aquifers when they soak up snow melt and rain water thereby reducing runoff and erosion.

Without open space we would find ourselves committed to ever expanding storm water systems and retention ponds. These are costly undertakings and should not be necessary if we commit to wise choices for protecting our open spaces.

Wildlife depends on open space and wildlife corridors are essential for their migration patterns. In the fields below our house we see elk migrating back and forth.

We see bird life, migratory and the resident populations, in the fields and across their flyways.

Last week we spotted the first bald eagle of the season. The hooting of a horned owl told us that spring is coming.

Without the open spaces that they depend on to survive we would find much of our wildlife disappearing. Loss of open space is all too familiar in other communities that have not been able to regulate and conserve open space.

Currently, almost all of our open space and agricultural land is classified as "rural agricultural." This is unfortunate because little protection is offered to ensure that its longevity remains.

We have an opportunity to reverse this situation. The proposed land use regulations currently being debated by the county and up for adoption offers a beginning.

These regulations are the outgrowth of years of work by residents, neighborhood associations, the Taos County Commissioners and their staff and will support the 2007 Comprehensive Growth Management Plan. If adopted, they will form the legal basis for implementing the Plan.

Development on open space lands will then be subject to more scrutiny and will have to stand the test of community review and sanction. The regulations make good sense if we are to look to the future with some degree of confidence that we have done the best we can at this point in time.

Taos also needs other planning mechanisms to protect our open spaces. The Taos Land Trust is to be praised for conservation of open spaces and voluntary use of conservation easements.

Public land banking and development rights transfer offer other viable instruments.

These mechanisms are part of long range planning and have to be carefully thought out and will require cooperation of both the Town of Taos and Taos County.

These ideas need not be a dream, but will they require political commitment and public involvement to implement. We can be good stewards of our land.

As the county prepares to put forward the Land Use Regulations for adoption toward the end of this month, the county commissioners need to hear from you, they need to know that people do care about our open spaces and want them conserved. Open space is 'our best idea'. Let the commissioners know.

Bob Parker is a long time resident of Taos with a background in environmental planning, urban design and architecture.