

Residents: English-only land code excludes Spanish speakers

By J.R. Logan

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Multi-day hearings on the proposed Taos County Land Use Code hit a snag in their first morning when a contingent of county residents turned out to complain that the 187-page document had not been translated into Spanish.

County officials say translating the code could be prohibitively costly, but some members of the public are adamant that there are Taos County residents who can only comprehend written Spanish and who would be affected by the new regulations.

The hearings were scheduled to allow public comment about the document, which has been a decade in the making and covers everything from minimum lot size to approved land uses and zoning.

A sizable crowd showed up at 9 a.m. Tuesday (Jan. 24), but the meeting wasn't opened for public comment until after 11 a.m. By then, about a third of the crowd had filtered out of the commission chambers.

When given the chance to speak, the public raised concerns over issues like affordable housing, split lots and new regulations covering renewable energy projects.

By far the most contentious issue was the question of whether some residents of the county would be able to understand the implications of the proposed code because there was not a Spanish version.

"I would think that our *ancianos* would also like to be a part of this planning process," said Arroyo Seco resident and Taos Municipal School Board member Stella Gallegos. "And yes, they do speak English, but the majority of them only can comprehend in Spanish."

Gallegos and several other audience members from the Arroyo Seco/Arroyo Hondo/ Valdez area asked whether the code would be translated before the commission considers its adoption.

The land use code includes 11 "overlays" — zoning maps that were prepared by individual neighborhood associations. There are no overlays for the Arroyo Hondo, Arroyo Seco or Valdez areas, and residents there have been clashing over board politics and the way draft zoning maps were drawn.

County Manager Jacob Caldwell was hesitant to commit the county to translating the document, calling it "a monumental task" that would likely be very costly. Caldwell noted that none of the county's other ordinances are in Spanish, and he said choosing to translate the entire land use code would require a complete policy change at Taos County. He also said planning department

staff are proficient in Spanish and are available to answer questions or make clarifications.

Those arguments did little to allay the concerns of audience members who insisted on having a Spanish version.

“This is not one ordinance,” said Valdez resident Pennie Wardlow. “This is people’s land.”

County attorney Barbara Mart'nez pointed out that the county went beyond its legal obligation to spread the word of the code by advertising notice in English and Spanish and sending bilingual letters of notice to all property owners.

Pressure from audience members prompted the commission to consider whether to promise that the code would be translated. Public meetings law prevented the commission from immediately making a decision on whether to translate the code. Amid the discussion, commissioners unanimously agreed to publish notice of a vote next Tuesday (Jan. 31) that would decide whether to translate the land use code into Spanish.

Commission Chairman Joe Mike Durán acknowledged the question of translation could hinder an already prolonged adoption of the code. “This is going to delay the whole process,” Durán said.

No estimate on how much a translation would cost taxpayers was available by press time. All told, the county says it has already spent more than \$20,000 and 800 hours of staff time advertising the land use code.

Yet some audience members complained they weren’t aware of the proposed changes. Jesse Gonzales of Arroyo Hondo said he never got a letter, and he complained that his neighbors weren’t notified either. “What is the price that we’re going to have to pay if we rush this issue?” Gonzales said. “In other words, slow down a little bit.”

His brother, Mitch Gonzales, expressed similar concerns. “No one understands what’s going on in the county because they are not aware,” Mitch Gonzales said. “Sure it took six years in the making to do (the land use code). Why can’t it take another six years so people can look at what’s going on?”

But Kate Black, co-owner of KTAO Solar Radio, countered that her radio station did “a very aggressive campaign” to get word out about the land use code meetings. “I want to take an opportunity to remind everybody that there have been a lot of opportunities for the public to come up to get information and to bring their questions and concerns,” Black said, and urged commissioners to adopt the code, saying it would allow for important economic development in Taos County by giving existing businesses.

“One of the most important things we can do in this community,” Black said, is to allow economic drivers in the business sector to make changes that will stimulate the entire community, not just for an individual but as a whole.”

Proposed land use code hearings are scheduled into next week. For details contact the Taos County Planning Department at (575) 737-6440.



A thinned-out crowd remains after a short recess for the public comment section during the first hearing on the proposed Taos County Land Use Code, Tuesday (Jan. 24) inside the commission chambers.

Tina Larkin