



Polishing a 'jewel': Groups seek funds for old courthouse

By J.R. Logan

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In 1970, a year after Taos County vacated its courthouse on Taos Plaza, Taosenos were asking themselves how best to put the historic building to use.

Forty-two years later, that same question remains unanswered, and most of the structure remains empty and locked.

The 80-year-old county courthouse on the Plaza's north side is consistently identified as a great first step toward bringing life back to the Plaza and restoring a sense of community in the heart of Taos. It has been called an "anchor." A "catalyst." A "win-win."

But for a variety of reasons, the building remains nothing more than potential.

In a renewed effort to revitalize the courthouse, citizens, merchants and government officials are looking into possible funding sources and once again asking: "What could we do with this place?"

On Friday (March 23), representatives of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs Historic Preservation Division toured the courthouse with a small group of residents and officials. Harvey Kaplan, an architectural reviewer for the state agency, appeared eager to see the building restored to its former glory and opened to the public.

"This would be a real feather in Taos' cap," Kaplan said. "There doesn't seem to be any downside here."

Kaplan's optimism might suggest some naivety.

Since it was vacated in 1969, the story of the old courthouse includes plenty of political squabbling between the town and county governments, and more than one lawsuit.

The most recent push to get something going in the courthouse sank when the town and county couldn't move forward on a lease agreement.

"It has turned out to be a political football back and forth," said Allen Vigil, a longtime county planner and advocate for Taos culture. "It continues to be a lingering legacy of bickering rather than getting something done. But I think there still enough affection from the community that people are still willing to step forward and draw support. It's a jewel."

In the four decades since it was vacated, there's been no shortage of ideas on how to use the courthouse. The county commission has appointed at least three task forces—one in 1995, another in 2000 and a third in 2009 — to look into how best to use the space.

"It would be such a showcase for the community and people coming into the community," said F.R. Bob Romero, who was chairman of the task force appointed in 2000. "It has such great appeal."

All three groups appointed by the commission came back with similar proposals. Their ideas included:

- Use the upstairs mural room as a cultural heritage center and/or historic museum;
- Find space for a revolving art gallery that would allow locals to show and sell arts and crafts;
- Put a visitors center or information booth in the building;
- Build modern public bathrooms to serve locals and visitors on the Plaza;
- Put a barbershop, post office or utility bill payment station on the ground floor to draw locals back to the Plaza;
- Bring in economic development or business consulting groups who can use the upstairs for office space.

At the moment, ground floor space that fronts the plaza is leased on a month-to-month basis to a number of retailers. The small locations were originally intended to be business incubators — affordable locations for retailers getting off the ground —but some of those businesses have been renting there for nearly 20 years.

The upstairs is essentially vacant, except for a cluttered office occupied by the Taos County Historical Society. The second floor includes the showpiece of the building — the old district courtroom — that features priceless murals commissioned in the early '30s by the federal Works Project Administration.

Most of the time, the doors to the courtroom are locked. Tourists can often be seen peering through the windows trying to catch a glimpse of the famous murals.

"People are always asking if I have a key to that room," said Ernestina Còrdova with the historical society. "I think it would be great to get it open. It would be a wonderful asset. I'll bet half of our own kids haven't even been in there to see those murals."

Aside from the political challenges to restoration, the structural integrity of the building becomes a greater concern the longer it sits vacant. The county has made some improvements recently using grant funds: Asbestos and lead paint have been removed and a new HVAC system was recently completed.

The Taos Arts and Cultural District, which has identified the courthouse as one of its top priorities, fixed some of the courthouse windows during a Plaza cleanup last fall.

The Historic Preservation Commission as well as the downtown merchant's group The Taos Project have both expressed interest in helping make something happen in the courthouse.

But the building still has plenty of problems and will need much more financial support. The heating and cooling system is far from complete. Leaks in the roof have caused damage to the adobe walls. And some of the upstairs floors are sagging. It's still unclear exactly how much harm 40 years of intermittent occupancy have done. Plus, ramps or an elevator must be installed to make the building handicapped accessible.

Kaplan from the state historic office told a group who toured the courthouse with him Friday that the first and most important step in getting funding for restoration is to commission a detailed plan — including a thorough structural and historic analysis as well as a use plan that would identify exactly what uses the building would house.

"Planning is not as sexy as ribbon cuttings, but in the long run, it will save you a lot of effort," Kaplan said.



Taos County employee Wayne Chávez stops to look at artist Bert Phillips' mural, "Obedience Casts Out Fear," in the old courthouse Monday (March 26).

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