



EDITORIAL

Finding new uses for the old county courthouse

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The old county courthouse at Taos Plaza is a good idea just waiting to happen.

The venerable old building has sat there under used since 1970, the year after Taos County moved its courthouse to Albright Street.

Over the decades, people have talked and talked about what they would like to see in that building while it was allowed to fall into disrepair. That's too bad, because the old courthouse has so much going for it, such as the murals the federal Works Project Administration commissioned artists to create during the Great Depression. In this case the artists were Bert Phillips, Ward Lockwood, Victor Higgins and Emil Bisttram.

Upstairs has two large office spaces. Downstairs has the old jail that was in the movie "Easy Rider," plus the tunnels that run under the Plaza.

The main floor offers prime space on the Plaza for a number of possible uses.

On March 23, representatives from the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs Historic Preservation Division toured the building with local residents and officials.

An architectural reviewer for the state group recommended having a thorough structural and historic analysis as well as a plan for its use before finding the funds to get the work done.

Three separate task forces in 1995, 2000 and 2009 came up with similar ideas for the building such as historic exhibits, a revolving gallery for local artists, modern restrooms, businesses that would appeal to locals, and a visitor center.

These are sound suggestions that could draw people to the Plaza. We want to attract tourists, but we believe it is important the building's uses interest locals also.

While we are at it, we'll offer our own suggestion: a deli featuring locally made food. Vendors who use the Taos County Economic Development Corp.'s commercial kitchen could have another outlet for their products. How about tables and chairs set up on the Plaza so people could enjoy the food they buy?

And if the county wants to still have a business incubator, then firm rules should be established regarding how long a business gets to incubate in this prime retail area.

Of course, the courthouse is only one problem that needs to be addressed if Taos wants to attract crowds to the Plaza more often than such special events as Fiestas, Christmas tree lighting and Taos Plaza Live during the summer.

Parking remains a huge issue, which, like the courthouse, has been a topic of discussion for years. People, especially if they are locals, won't go downtown if they can't find a convenient place to park.

Restoring and reinventing the old county courthouse could go a long way toward making Taos Plaza the destination we all dream about. Let's make that happen this time.