

## **Town of Taos appoints attorney with land, water experience**

**By Matthew van Buren**

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The town of Taos has now filled four of five appointed positions, as C. Brian James' appointment as town attorney was ratified unanimously by the Town Council, Tuesday (June 5).

Municipal Judge Richard Chávez swore James in Tuesday after a brief address by Mayor Darren Córdova, who described James as "very, very qualified." Córdova said he had discussed a number of issues and challenges the town is facing with the attorney, and James' wealth of knowledge and experience will serve Taos well.

"He came very highly recommended," he said. "I'm confident that Mr. James is the right person."

James will earn a salary of \$95,000 per year, according to information from town budget documents and the Human Resources department.

According to application materials James submitted to the town last August, he has "three decades of relevant experience in representing municipalities or governmental entities, albeit most of them substantially larger than the town of Taos." He wrote that he has spent half of his legal career in New Mexico, having been a member of the New Mexico bar since 1993. He also wrote that he had been offered a job with Taos previously but was unable to work out "financial and job security details."

According to materials James submitted, he has researched and developed various ordinances; reviewed hundreds of contracts, requests for proposals and other procurement documents; and researched, drafted and presented hundreds of opinion letters on a variety of subjects.

Most recently, James worked for Los Alamos County, where he served as acting county attorney and assistant county attorney, working on community development, community services and planning and zoning issues. He has also worked for the New Mexico Department of Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources, served as Bernalillo County District Attorney and was lead litigator for the Lower Rio Grande Water Rights Adjudication — the "largest water rights matter in New Mexico."

Speaking with *The Taos News*

Tuesday, James said that adjudication would be his biggest accomplishment that wouldn't be publicized.

"That's a big-time adjudication," he said.

He said interviews with the town tended to focus on "plumb(ing) the depth of my experience."

“I have an extensive background in land use,” he said.

The town had been without a staff attorney since early March, when then-assistant attorney Jack Clough announced his retirement. Former town attorney Allen Ferguson retired at the end of May 2011, though he has been working under a contract with the town on the Abeyta Water Rights Settlement. Since Ferguson’s departure, the town has been contracting with outside law firms to perform a variety of legal work.

James’ appointment came on the heels of recently named town manager Oscar Rodr'guez’ appointment. The town continues its search for a police chief, and it has received more than a dozen applications. Jerry Hogrefe has been serving as interim chief since Rick Anglada’s retirement at the end of last year.

State law and town statute call for appointments to be made at an “organizational meeting” within 21 days of a municipal election; the last municipal election was held March 6. However, Còrdova and members of the council delayed the appointments, with Còrdova saying he wanted changes made to the town ordinance that would, in part, limit the amount of severance pay appointed employees could receive.

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**New Taos town attorney C. Brian James, right, is sworn in by Municipal Judge Richard Chávez as Mayor Darren Còrdova looks on. Former town attorney Allen Ferguson retired about a year ago.**