



Land use changes pushed to January

By J.R. Logan

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Before a full house Tuesday (Aug. 14), the Taos County Commission voted 3-0 to postpone a vote on changes to the county's land use code until January.

The entire hearing lasted less than three minutes.

"We've got two new commissioners coming on. We'll have them deal with it," said commissioner chairman Joe Mike Durán as he left immediately after the hearing.

Tuesday's meeting was to consider relatively minor changes to the county's existing land use code that would have allowed the county to adopt zoning maps (called "overlays") without having to rewrite the entire ordinance.

Members of the Upper Las Colonias Neighborhood Association approached the commissioners in June proposing the changes, and the association hired former Taos County Manager Adam Baker to draft some suggestions.

The county's planning department took those suggestions and reworked parts of the code, mostly dealing with definitions. Those changes were being considered Tuesday.

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Durán has been wary of touching the land use issue following a contentious and racially charged hearing in January regarding a proposed overhaul to the current regulations. The overhaul was meant to streamline and de-politicize the administrative process for development, while using zoning to protect agricultural land and promote business in appropriate areas.

But commissioners heard from dozens of residents who were deeply divided about the proposed code. Proponents of the code said they'd made every effort to reach out to their neighbors.

Amid the turmoil, Durán made a motion to "drop" the whole thing and the commission voted 4-1 to let it go. Durán has since been adamant that the county not reconsider the issue for at least a year.

Many of those who spoke in January showed up again for Tuesday's meeting. But this time, none were given the chance to voice their opinions.

Durán opened the hearing and immediately made a motion to continue the issue until Jan. 22. Commissioners Larry Sánchez and Dan Barrone voted in favor of the motion. The three commissioners then voted to close the hearing, prompting laughter and jeers from the audience.

Joe Torres, a landowner in Arroyo Seco and president of the Arroyo Seco/Valdéz Neighborhood Association, said he was happy the issue had been put off.

In January, Torres gave a blistering attack of the land use code, and he was among a contingent insisting that the entire 186-page document be translated into Spanish.

Torres came prepared Tuesday with hundreds of signatures on what his group is calling "La Gente" (the people) petition, which asked that neighborhood associations prove that they've contacted 90 percent of the residents they represent, and that associations preserve agricultural traditions. Torres denied that the term "La Gente" was meant to exacerbate racial tensions surrounding the land use issue.

Upper Las Colonias board member Barbara Sheppard accused opponents of the land use code of resorting to "scare tactics" to rile up residents. "We feel like this is being led by fear, not by truth," Sheppard said. She and other members of the Upper Las Colonias board said they would continue to work on getting their overlay approved.

Commissioners Andrew Chávez and Nicklos Jaramillo were not at Tuesday's meeting. Both will be off the commission at the beginning of next year. Jaramillo will term out, and Chávez lost a bid for reelection in the June Primary.

At hearings in June and July, Chávez and Jaramillo expressed support for moving forward with the land use issue.

Their seats will be taken by Gabriel Romero and Tom Blankenhorn, who have both voiced support of the comprehensive land use overhaul proposed earlier this year.

Blankenhorn said in a phone interview Tuesday afternoon that he would like the commission to take another look at the entire overhaul to the land use code when he takes office. Blankenhorn said the ordinance needed some small revisions — on things like "overly restrictive" rules on inoperable vehicles, ATV use, and firewood and food vendors.

"I think everybody recognizes this framework is useful and changes are needed," Blankenhorn said. "I'm really confident that we're going to get it done."