



The value of a county land use ordinance

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What is the value of a good land use regulation to the ordinary Taos resident?

Taosenos, and indeed all people, have two basic, essential needs: food and shelter. For the average Taoseno, finding affordable housing is difficult if not near-impossible.

New Mexico is one of the poorest states in the country, and Taos is one of the poorest counties in the state. Couple low income with sky-high real estate prices and the end result is what we have witnessed over the past decades: Most Taosenos simply cannot afford adequate housing, much less new home ownership.

The link between housing availability and land use regulations is clearly demonstrated in a recent study conducted by the Taos Chamber of Commerce entitled "Revision 2020, Affordable Housing Element."

The study notes that Taos County has median household incomes and per capita incomes that fall far below both state and national levels.

The median household income is \$35,800 in the County, more than \$15,000 less than the national average, and \$7,000 less than the state average. A 2009 study found that Taos County ranks 24th of 36 counties with its average weekly wage of \$537. The median sales price for all homes sold in Taos between 2006 and 2010 was \$278,000—about \$100,000 over what would be affordable for moderate-income households.

Based on Housing and Urban Development (HUD) calculations, a home must be priced at or below \$197,000 to be affordable to moderate income households. Low-income households can afford a maximum home price of \$133,000.

Of the 90 housing units on the market here in Taos during the period studied, only seven (five townhomes and two single-family homes) were affordable to low income households. According to the report, 95% of the Taos county workforce cannot afford to buy a median priced valued house in Taos.

These dreadful statistics spell doom for our treasured Northern New Mexican culture. Our young people simply cannot afford to stay in Taos, their homeland, to live and raise a family. After high

school graduation, they leave in droves. Most will never return to live in the valley their ancestors called home for generations.

The exodus of our youth will forever change the fabric of culture in Taos. This trend will continue unless and until a solution is found.

Key to understanding the “affordable housing” problem in Taos is recognizing the impact of “custom” houses on the available housing inventory. Builders in Taos primarily construct expensive custom houses. They are reluctant to build large-scale developments of the more modest “cookie cutter” variety, which would be affordable to most County residents. Why?

Indeed, there are many factors. One major reason is lack of zoning regulations.

Commercial builders will not invest in building large-scale developments, with investment costs of perhaps millions of dollars, in areas that lack zoning and other government “regulatory” framework components. Density issues, for example, would have to be addressed. The absence of land use regulations is a significant, prohibitive factor to the commercial developer.

I applaud the town and the Chamber for their effort in tackling one of Taos County’s most perplexing problems.

My point in mentioning this initiative is obvious: A good, effective, comprehensive land use regulation is an essential component for effective planning and growth. It is a key solution to solving the problem of affordable housing in Taos.

A modified version of the Taos County Land Use Regulation (Ordinance 2012-1) presented to the county commissioners last January is the way forward. That 187 page document, years in the making, is complete and comprehensive. It is a worthy plan for Taos County.

The focus of our combined county-wide effort should be on the passage of a modified, consensus version of Ordinance 2012-1. I have spoken to many county residents who initially opposed the plan. They commented that they objected to minor provisions, but considered it a good plan overall. I suggest we start a process of modification to that plan. Representatives of the various Neighborhood Associations could meet to plan a way forward. Meetings, chaired by the Associations, could be held to receive public comment. I think a consensus version is achievable. This process can begin immediately. The consensus version of Ordinance 2012-1 could be ready for approval in January when the new commission is seated.

Social cancers, like the lack of affordable housing, will only be solved through a combined county effort of citizens who care about building a better tomorrow for all the good people of Taos county.

David Maes is a resident of Taos County.

