



FAA awards \$1M in historic airport pact

By Chandra Johnson

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Taos Regional Airport Director John Thompson is well-placed to document history.

At the Taos Convention Center, Saturday (Oct. 6), Thompson focused his camera as U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, Taos Mayor Darren Córdova, acting FAA Administrator Michael Huerta and leaders of Taos Pueblo filed into council chambers to finalize a historic agreement.

Huerta was on-hand to announce the FAA's Record of Decision — the final step in a decades-long Environmental Impact Statement for the project, which will give the airport a new crosswind runway. He also announced that the FAA will award a \$1.05 million grant to help fund the \$20 million project.

“Safety is the key thing. We'll be able to land in the wind. But this,” Thompson said, motioning to the delegation, “this is huge.”

Under the amended decision after long negotiations between town and tribal authorities, the FAA raised the minimum airspace altitude over the heritage site from 2,000 feet to 5,000 feet. The agreement also expanded the minimum altitude over the tribe's sacred Blue Lake Wilderness Area from 2,000 feet to 3,000 feet.

“There were many contentious meetings, but it became very simple: They wanted to protect their living World Heritage Site. Who would not want to do that in our community?” Mayor Córdova said. “Our objective became, how do we protect the pueblo while we make a safe airport?”

FAA officials were given a full tour of the Pueblo's UNESCO World Heritage Site, which tribal officials have been fighting for more than 20 years to protect from potential flyovers that could compromise ancient buildings and sacred wilderness areas. With the site protected under the new altitudes, an agreement was finally struck in January. “This year, I found out we were very good neighbors,” Taos Pueblo Gov. Laureano Romero said. “I'm very happy to sit here now.”

The new crosswind runway will measure 8,600 feet long by 100 feet wide and will allow planes to land and take off more safely in high winds.

Mayor Córdova called the agreement a victory for all citizens of Taos.

“This was not an easy task to initiate,” Córdova said. “Even though some people said when I took office and made this a priority that it couldn't happen, all I had to hear was the word ‘can't.’” Huerta told those assembled in council chambers that the grant would offer \$800,000 for the design of the runway, while another \$250,000 would further safeguard Taos Pueblo with a “passive monitoring system.”

“The system will gather information that we will use to find out how the airport is functioning,” Huerta said. “It’s taken a lot of people a lot of time to reach this point. I think we got it right. It’s a great day for everyone here in Northern New Mexico.”

Town Manager Oscar Rodriguez told *The Taos News* this week that the new runway could be completed in as little as 3-4 years, and if the new runway causes an increase in problematic flights over the Pueblo, it will be used only when wind conditions require it.



Tina Larkin

From left, Taos Mayor Darren Córdova, former deputy secretary of state Don Francisco Trujillo, acting FAA Administrator Michael Huerta, U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, Taos Pueblo Gov. Laureano Romero and Taos Pueblo Lt. Gov. Gilbert Suazo Sr. have a laugh after the Oct. 6 meeting at the Town Council Chambers.