



Town of Taos seeks input regarding land use update

By Matthew van Buren

The Taos News, 11/15/2012

The town of Taos is asking for more public input as it prepares to adopt an updated land use element to its "Vision 2020 Master Plan."

Vision 2020, originally adopted in 1999, is a comprehensive plan for the town that sets goals, objectives and policies while laying out a long-range vision for future development. It is in the process of undergoing a piecemeal revision as the town examines elements including infrastructure, natural resources, parks and recreation, community services and historic preservation.

The Town Council has adopted revised plans regarding housing and community economic development. It will be examining the land-use element in the coming weeks.

By their natures, comprehensive plans like Vision 2020 are meant to be "living documents" that are updated regularly. The land-use element of "(Re)vision 2020" notes deficiencies in the existing plan.

"Vision 2020 was a noble attempt to create a sustainable community," the proposed revision states. "However, it has become too easy to disregard Vision 2020 as 'only advisory' or 'just a plan.'" The draft suggests the town respond with "measurable success and a clear set of goals, policies and objectives that guide development decisions toward a sustainable future."

Long-range planner Matthew Foster said the plan contains land-use recommendations for "every square inch of the town," and he has been busy bringing it before various community groups and governmental organizations to get feedback from the public. "It does address the entire town," he said. "Everyone should be affected by, and therefore interested in, it."

According to an earlier version of the proposed plan, Taos residents who have participated in the process so far have tended to agree Taos should preserve open space, have a mix of housing types, provide parks and urban open space and ensure the longevity of "good Taos urban design and architecture." Other issues raised by members of the public in a Community Preference Survey include a need for more trees and native landscaping, the desire to preserve open spaces and views, adding bike lanes, safety concerns related to gang activity and a lack of employment opportunities.

The land-use draft examines demographics and trends, incorporating other studies and plans, in order to predict and plan for the future of Taos. The draft encourages new development that provides "economic and social benefits while contributing to environmental quality and public health," including preserving agricultural and design traditions.

Much of the draft focuses on the need for greater density, arguing that sprawl threatens the “beauty, economy and livability of Taos.” “The trend of recent development (i.e. sprawl) creates animosity toward new development,” it states. “The animosity is understandable. New development often leads to increased traffic congestion, spoiled views and lost opportunities for providing alternative transportation, recreation or other types of neighborhood amenities.”

The plan projects a dramatic population increase in the coming decades, with the estimated population of the town reaching 8,093 and the county 50,546 by 2050. According to the proposed plan, the town will either need to increase allowable densities or annex 1,417 acres by then to maintain its current population density of one resident per 0.62 acres. However, it notes, “continuing the pattern of low-density development and investing in infrastructure along the fringe of town will increase the budget deficit and lead to greater system inefficiencies, particularly with water and sewer systems.”

Threats to water resources will increase with the population and corresponding development, the plan states, and would be exacerbated by sprawling development. The document goes on to encourage infill development and redevelopment of underused land. The proposed land-use element suggests that higher-density development would offer affordable housing options for professionals such as teachers, nurses, firefighters, police officers and retail salespeople. It also suggests an increase in traffic congestion that cannot be solved by wider or higher-capacity roads. The draft plan proposes doing a better job of accommodating alternative modes of transportation, such as buses, walking or cycling. Higher-density developments are also advocated for in this context.

“The low-density development across our landscape damages wildlife habitat, diminishes public health and erodes the unique character of Taos,” the proposed plan states.

Of course, the land-use element addresses the particularly controversial issue of “big box” development. It prognosticates that another national retailer’s “big box,” such as Super Walmart, Target, LOWE’S or Home Depot, will move to Taos.

“Unfortunately, the hideous design of big boxes and the questionable economic benefit are at odds with the town’s goals,” the draft states. “Nonetheless, the population growth will eventually attract another big box. Regardless if the box is 30,000 or 80,000 square feet, the current development standards for ‘large-scale commercial’ developments in the (land use development code) only decorate a big box with ‘Pueblo style’ architecture, require a bike rack or native landscaping.”

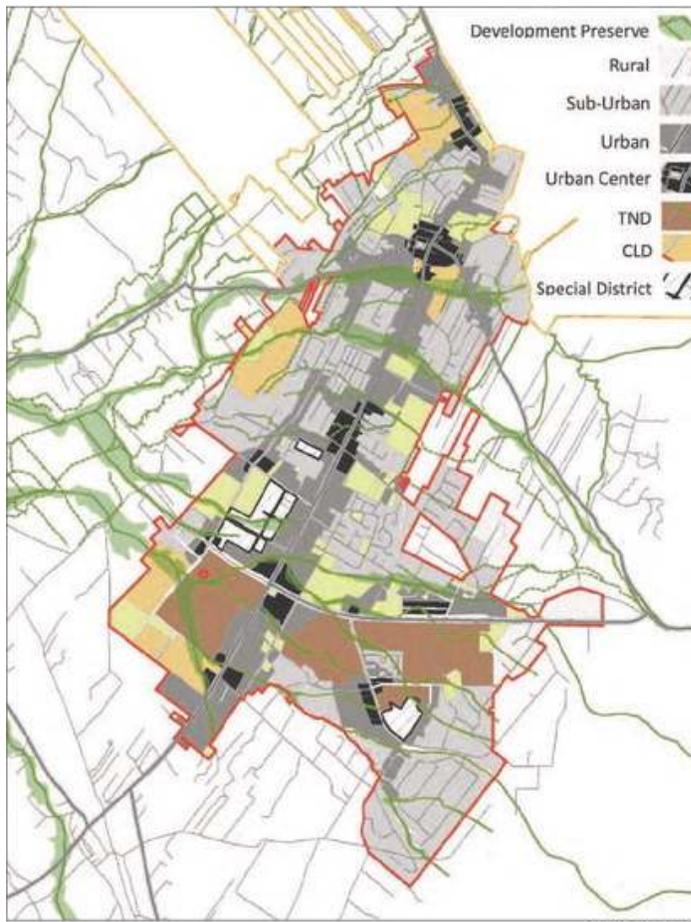
The plan calls for a design that contributes to the character of the community in which it is located, including eliminating the “visual blight” of a large parking lot and properly addressing the “massing and fenestration,” or layout and window placement, of the building. It also seeks to protect rural areas from such development and gather public input before construction is allowed to go forward.

Foster said his vision for Taos includes a “collection of neighborhoods” that are complete, compact and diverse, with “a little bit of everything.” Neighborhoods that include parks, playgrounds, amenities, businesses, schools and other features would cut down on driving while contributing to a neighborhood’s character and sense of place, Foster said.

Foster said the Town Council will be reviewing the draft Nov. 27. He said he will be asking the Planning Commission for its endorsement Dec. 5 before taking the plan back to the Town Council for adoption Dec. 11.

To review the plan and proposed revisions, visit www.taosgov.com/planning/vision.php.

Comments and questions may be submitted to MFoster@taosgov.com.



Courtesy Town of Taos

Long-range planner Matt Foster recommends the town adopt this map to guide planning decisions.