

County seeks \$500K for old courthouse

Building eyed for economic development

By J.R. Logan

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Taos County is seeking \$500,000 to revitalize the old county courthouse on Taos Plaza — a historic and prominent building that has been called an “anchor” for economic development downtown.

County officials say the grant will be used for structural improvements to make the building useful as a cultural facility and visitor center.

Since it was vacated in 1970, the fate of the building has been in limbo. Most of the second floor remains empty and locked, including the old courtroom, which is adorned with murals dating to the 1930s.

The downstairs of the courthouse has been used as a business incubator. The idea is for fledgling businesses to pay reduced rent as a chance to get on their feet, though some tenants have been in the building for years. The Talpa Community Center recently began using the space to showcase arts and crafts from across the county.

Starting in 1995, the county has appointed three separate volunteer groups to look at possible uses for the vacant courthouse. Suggestions range from creating a museum or gallery to highlight the region’s cultural resources, to putting in a barber shop or post office to bring locals back to the plaza.

Progress on the building have often been stifled by political infighting between the town and county. Officials now appear hopeful that they can work together to see the building put to use.

The county has already spent more than \$100,000 in grant money replacing the building’s heating system. A new boiler has been installed, but the entire system has yet to be completed.

The \$500,000 grant proposal from the county would be used to address some minor structural issues (like springy floors) as well as make the building handicapped-accessible to meet federal law. The half million dollars is the maximum amount that would could be allocated as part of a federal Community Development Block Grant.

The town of Taos and the associated Taos Arts and Cultural District are also seeking funding for the building. The Arts and Cultural District recently got a \$25,000 grant from the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs. The grant will combine with a \$10,000 match for an architectural study of the building.

The Arts and Cultural District has continually identified revitalizing the courthouse as a top priority.

Harvey Kaplan, an architectural reviewer for the Department of Cultural Affairs visited the courthouse last year and “This would be a real feather in Taos’ cap,” Kaplan said. “There doesn’t seem to be any downside here.”

The application deadline for the grant is Feb. 15. Award announcements are made several months later.

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Tina Larkin

Taos County is seeking a block grant for an economic development project at the Old County Courthouse on Taos Plaza. These murals are found on the second floor.



Tina Larkin

A sampling of the historic murals on the little-used second floor.