

EDITORIAL

Grants could bring new life to old county courthouse

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Taos County is banking on a \$500,000 community block grant to help revitalize the old courthouse on Taos Plaza. Here is an economic development project certainly worth pursuing.

County officials envision using the building as a cultural, visitor and business center that would draw people to Taos' historic downtown district.

Right now, the courthouse, built in 1932, is a public building with little useful purpose but, ah, so much potential.

Upstairs, it has historic Depression-era murals commissioned by the Works Progress Administration. On the main floor is the old jail cell featured in a famous scene from the movie *Easy Rider*.

And, then there is location, location, location.

By accounts, people began discussing what to do with the old courthouse since the county moved out in 1970 but with little to show for it. The building has businesses on the first floor, including the recent arrival of an artists' cooperative; nothing is happening on the second story.

We, like many others, hope that's about to change.

If approved, the half-million would be used to make the building handicapped-accessible and take care of structural repairs. Already, the county has spent more than \$100,000 in grant money toward fixing the building's heat.

The town of Taos and the Taos Arts and Cultural District are also applying for grants.

So, it appears there is a lot of support locally to make this old building shine.

We too offer our encouragement.

The town of Taos has a helpful visitor center on the south side of town that welcomes out-of-towners and sells products made by local artisans. We would also like to have a year-round presence downtown, and the upstairs of the courthouse is an ideal spot for a visitor center/cultural facility. It could be more than a tourist stop; it could be a place for Taos-ers to show off everything that makes this area unique.

Not every visitor arrives from the south side of town. And, too often we see tourists wandering around with scant clue about what is available in the downtown historic district and beyond. Often visitors can be seen peering through the windows at the beautiful murals in an empty room behind locked doors.

If part of this building is indeed to be an incubator — helping start-ups by providing cheap rent in a highly visible location — then a business' stay should be limited. That isn't happening in most cases and more wannabe entrepreneurs should have their shot.

In the past, the county has focused on seeking block money to fix up roads. While paving the West Rim Road certainly was a boost to the long-ignored western part of the county, we question whether other road projects offered much benefit to more than a handful of people.

Finally, here is a proposal that could have a positive impact on the county as a whole.