

Town launches economic development talks

By Matthew van Buren

The Taos News, 2/21/2013

A group gathered at the Town Hall training room Tuesday evening (Feb. 19) to start the ball rolling on a community economic development plan for Taos.

The economic development plan is one piece of the town's efforts to update its "Vision 2020 Master Plan," adopted in 1999. Tuesday's audience included local businesspeople, nonprofit representatives and others, while town consultants Leap Partners led the meeting.

Leap's Matthew Spriggs, who used to work as the town community economic development director, began by saying economic development is not a "spectator sport" and requires broad community involvement and follow-through. He said the process of revising the economic development plan will go at least through June and will include regular focus group meetings.

Spriggs went over some of the basic language and methods that will be used during the process, including progressing from a broad "vision statement" to specific, measurable objectives. He also spoke to the importance of a diverse economy, which he said Taos is lacking.

"We're already shrinking. We're collapsing. We don't have the diversity," he said. "Obviously, we have a crisis."

He also went over draft vision and mission statements, intended to be brief but rather broad expressions to keep future goal-setting on task. Leap's draft mission statement included stabilizing, diversifying and expanding Taos' economy and making community investments to improve residents' quality of life, as well as protecting, expanding and leveraging community assets.

However, after Spriggs' initial comments the meeting devolved into pedantic questioning by audience members.

Local businessman Fritz Hahn interrupted Spriggs to question the Leap Partners' credentials and ask if they are connected to developers and therefore biased. He also complained that the draft vision statement, which laid out a vision of a "thriving and stable economy that protects and leverages its strongest community assets" to create a high quality of life, was too bland and did not specifically address the local culture.

"It's very white," Hahn said.

Robin Collier, recording the meeting for Cultural Energy, also interjected thoughts on subsistence farming and questioned how one measures the value of acequias. He wondered how the plan would measure non-cash economies.

“It’s the basis of our culture and how Taos operates,” he said.

Spriggs dismissed the comments as irrelevant and tried to move on.

With the audience’s questions, it took the better part of an hour to get past the mission and vision statements and into suggestions of Taos’ strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Spriggs said written suggestions from audience members would be transcribed and distributed to those participating in the process and possibly on the town’s website. He said focus groups will soon be formed and will meet through June.

The town is planning another meeting Thursday (Feb. 21) from 6-8 p.m. at the Town Hall training room.

The town’s current economic development plan and related information can be found online at <http://www.taosgov.com/econdev/econdev.php>. Town long-range planner and interim planning director Matthew Foster can be reached at mfooster@taosgov.com or by phone at (575) 751-2037.