

Town set to annex; dispatch move at issue

Town response to county proposal: 33 questions

By Matthew van Buren

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The Taos Town Council is poised to take action on two controversial issues early next week: whether to annex the regional airport and relocate emergency dispatch operations to the Kit Carson Regional Command Center.

A joint meeting between the town and county is being contemplated for Monday (March 11), with the bodies to discuss a new joint powers agreement (JPA) for dispatch, though the meeting's time and agenda had not been set as of press time.

Mayor Darren Córdova said if the meeting does occur, he expects the town and county to take action on a new JPA, which would name the Command Center as the future location of dispatch, as well as a proposed lease/purchase agreement for space in the center. He said if the joint meeting is not held, a lease/purchase agreement will be presented to the council the following day.

He said he believes the council will want to approve it and ask the state Department of Finance and Administration to deliver about \$360,000 worth of new equipment to the Command Center on Gusdorf Road.

"Council direction was very clear," he said.

Córdova said lease/purchase terms that are currently under discussion would include 2,300 square feet of space, "with the option to grow," for a purchase price of less than \$500,000.

At the Town Council's regular meeting Tuesday (March 12), Córdova said he expects the council to move to annex the airport and six miles of Highway 64.

The two issues have been points of contention recently, with Taos County proposing alternatives to both annexation and moving dispatch to the Kit Carson Regional Command Center, on Gusdorf Road. In response to Taos County's proposal to address management of the regional airport and dispatch operations, the town of Taos sent a list of 33 questions it would like answered.

The town has proposed annexing the airport in order to help pay for the construction — an idea county leaders and several residents of El Prado have vocally opposed. The Taos County Chamber of Commerce endorsed the move to annex this week

In its proposal, the county asks that the town to abandon its annexation plan and agree to no further annexations for a decade unless certain conditions are met.

Regarding emergency dispatch services, the county proposed alternate locations for dispatch, among other points.

Taos County Manager Stephen Archuleta wrote that the county believes the proposal to contain “realistic, simple and fair solutions that can be effectuated quickly and easily” to address the town’s needs and county’s concerns. He wrote that he hopes the proposal can be placed on the Town Council’s March 12 agenda.

In a March 1 letter to Archuleta, Rodriguez wrote that town staff is “closely studying the county’s proposal.”

“Indeed the issues are complicated, as you noted, so we understand and accept that the intent of your proposal is to set out a framework for negotiations, expecting that the two parties will clarify (at the) bargaining table,” Rodriguez wrote.

Rodriguez wrote that the town’s questions are meant to “establish the path and basis for continuing talks,” “identify how far the county is prepared to go on certain points” and “seek to clarify the value and/ or intent of what was offered.”

The town’s letter includes questions about guarantees the county can make in terms of keeping its commitments, what the county’s concerns are about the proposed Command Center move, what the county’s limit would be for increasing its contribution to dispatch, who would pay for the temporary relocation of dispatch and various other issues. To view the county’s proposal and the town’s response in their entirety, visit taosnews.com .

In an interview with *The Taos News* Tuesday (March 5), Rodriguez said he feels it necessary to separate the matters of dispatch and the airport.

“The two issues cannot be tied together,” he said. “These are major issues, very different.”

He was also critical of Archuleta and commissioners Tom Blankenhorn and Gabriel Romero for traveling to Washington, D.C., this week while negotiations continue between the governing bodies.

Rodriguez said recent talks among town and county leaders have been encouraging, however, and they are finding areas on which they agree. He said the town hopes to ease county concerns about future annexations along the Highway 64 corridor. He said the town supports the county’s planning efforts in the area and doesn’t want to make potential developers uncertain about the future.

“The last thing we want is for this annexation to have people hold back on the investments they might consider making along the corridor,” he said.

Rodriguez said the town is looking at a possible policy statement or other action to prevent further annexation in areas of county concern for a certain period, or even combining planning efforts with the county.

“We truly just want to annex the airport,” he said. “Nobody wants to create chaos.”

However, Rodriguez indicated the town’s course concerning annexation may be set. “We’re on a schedule,” he said. “We’re going to stick to that schedule.”

Còrdova also emphasized “critical deadlines” for both the airport construction and accepting dispatch equipment from the state.

“It’s time to move forward,” Còrdova said. “We feel we’ve done our due diligence ...We’re not going to wait anymore.”

He said it is important that the town move ahead with its plans on both issues, and he doesn’t feel it is premature to commit to a lease with Kit Carson, though an independent board that would make such decisions is contemplated by the draft JPA. He said the existing JPA “allows the town to decide a lot of things, including this.”

Còrdova said the town hopes not to fragment the town and county’s dispatch operations, which he called a “worst-case scenario,” but the town is prepared to focus on its own residents and proceed in the manner it deems most advantageous.

“We can’t wait around for the county,” he said.