

County: 'no wiggle room'

By J.R. Logan

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Taos County officials appear resigned to the fact that the town of Taos will move ahead with a controversial annexation, saying they are now hoping to “minimize the damage” the move could cause them.

The annexation is only part of increasingly strained discussions between the town and county over an airport expansion and funding and control of emergency dispatch. County officials say they are frustrated by what they see as the town’s apparent unwillingness to bend.

A special meeting between the town and county is set for Monday (March 11). Officials say it will offer a chance to discuss how funding and management responsibilities could be shared, including the redrafting of a joint powers agreement. The county doesn’t appear optimistic that the town will show much willingness to compromise.

At a meeting Tuesday (March 5), commissioner Joe Mike Durán called a previous work study session a “waste of time” and asked why another meeting was even necessary. “The town ain’t going to work with the county,” Durán said. “The town is just going to shove this down our throats.”

At the same meeting, Durán voted against allowing a radio station owned by town of Taos Mayor Darren Còrdova to use a county-owned park for an annual Mother’s Day celebration. Durán said his vote was in direct response to how the town was dealing with the county. (The county granted permission in a 2-1 vote.) Deputy county manager Rick Bellis seemed equally pessimistic. “If the decision’s been made before we had the meeting, what is the point of having the meeting?” Bellis said. “At this point, it’s triage. We’re just trying to minimize the damage.”

The county recently made a written offer to the town with the hope of avoiding the annexation of six miles of highway right of way, from the town’s northern boundary, to the Old Blinking Light intersection and west to the airport. The town says it needs to annex the airport to capture tax revenue to fund a proposed airport expansion. The county says it’s concerned the annexation through the heart of El Prado could lead to the annexation of adjacent businesses and the eventual loss of tax revenue.

Bellis said the town has suggested a one- or two-year moratorium on annexation be put in place to allow the two governments to resolve questions about zoning and other infrastructure issues.

In a multi-faceted proposal dated Feb. 21, the county said it would split the cost of running the airport with the town and would take over operation and fiscal responsibility for emergency dispatch.

The town responded Friday (March 1) with a list of 33 questions ranging from how much the county expects to lose in tax revenue to why the county appeared unwilling to move dispatch into Kit Carson Electric Cooperative's Regional Command Center.

Commission chairman Dan Barrone echoed the sentiments of many county officials in an interview Wednesday (March 6). "My sense is that [the town] is not really wanting to negotiate," Barrone said. "They're wanting us to buy in to what their plans are and there's no wiggle room."

From the county's perspective, the fallout of these discussions is sweeping. Officials say they aren't convinced moving to the Regional Command Center is the best option for solving problems at dispatch and could result in unnecessary costs to taxpayers. The county says the move could further strain the relationship between funding partners and jeopardize public safety.

Town officials have been in discussions with Espanola's dispatch center, where Taos' dispatch operations could be temporarily relocated during renovations or a move. Though the idea has not been publicly discussed, it has been suggested as an alternative if dispatch is moved from its current location, which was recently found to contain asbestos, although not in a form that poses an immediate threat to employees.

Bellis said the notion of moving dispatch outside the county is irresponsible and is contrary to the spirit that the talks started with.

"It's a disaster. It rolls the clock back 50 or 60 years. Almost no one in the country is in the situation that we would be in, with all these parochial interests overlapping and having to compete with one another," Bellis said. "We went from talking about reorganization and streamlining costs, to saying 'You're all on your own. Figure it out as you go along.'"