

Town flies solo on airport, dispatch

Disregarding county's claims, council OKs move, annexation

By Matthew van Buren

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The Taos Town Council solidified its positions on two contentious issues when it voted Tuesday (March 12) to annex the regional airport and enter a lease for space in the Kit Carson Regional Command Center.

The council chambers were packed for the lengthy meeting Tuesday evening, when the divisive issues were set to be decided. The mood was often tense, with grumbles from the audience frequently following statements from town leaders and the mayor's gavel sounding more than once.

The town and county have expressed distrust in one another over both issues and complained that the other body has been unresponsive. They have also pledged to continue working together on common issues for the good of the community. However, the town's unilateral votes drew consternation and threats of litigation from county leaders Tuesday.

The council first addressed the Command Center issue. Opponents of the move contend it represents an unnecessary cost to the town and would not result in concrete improvements to public safety. The town has long argued the current location of dispatch, on Civic Plaza Drive, is inadequate and renovating it would be impractical.

When speaking of the Command Center, Mayor Darren Córdova and other proponents have often said bringing many regional entities engaged in similar work together under the same roof would lead to more efficiencies for taxpayers and enhanced public safety.

The council's vote threatens to fragment the current constitution of emergency dispatch operations, however. County manager Stephen Archuleta said the county will be looking at other alternatives, including discussing a partnership with Red River, which operates its own dispatch. He said he feels the town has kept other members of the joint powers agreement (JPA) that manages dispatch "totally out of the loop."

"I think at this time Taos County needs to weigh its options," Archuleta said.

Town Manager Oscar Rodriguez told the council the lease/purchase agreement will allow the town to buy the space it requires under a "condominium concept." According to financial calculations he presented, the town will initially take over 2,526 square feet, or 27.9 percent, of the 9,050-square-foot building, for \$2,778 per month. It will also have the option to expand into another 1,716 square feet at a total cost of \$4,670 per month.

Though previous versions of the lease/purchase agreement listed a start date of Oct. 1, or else when dispatch was fully operational in the new space, Rodriguez said the agreement as approved by the council will begin July 1 or when the town starts hooking up equipment, whichever comes first.

Rodriguez told the council the bottom floor, where dispatch will be located, will be “sealed off” from the upstairs. He also said the town will install soundproofing in the space.

The lease gives the town the option to purchase space in the center within a decade, with the possibility for a five-year extension; Rodriguez said the town’s mortgage payments would equal its lease payments under the agreement, and lease payments will be credited to reducing the principal on the building.

The council engaged in little discussion about the agreement before a unanimous 3-0 vote to approve the lease/purchase agreement. Councilor Michael Silva abstained, he said, in order to eliminate any appearance of a conflict of interest.

‘Declaration of War’

The town soon moved into its discussion of the airport annexation, which kept the attention of the majority of those in the audience late into the evening.

The town has argued that the annexation of the town-owned airport and six miles of right of way along Highway 64 is necessary to fund a \$24 million expansion, including a new crosswind runway. The town expects to be responsible for \$1.25 million in matching funds and wants to recoup that investment through tax collections at the airport.

Residents of El Prado were outspoken in their opposition to the idea of annexation. El Prado Water and Sanitation District board president Telesfor Gonzales presented the council with a petition from acequia parciantes who are opposed to the annexation and said the move jeopardizes the rural characteristics of communities in the county.

“Annexation is not the answer,” he said.

Arsenio Córdova said his family has been in El Prado since before New Mexico was a state, and he wants to see the community’s identity protected. He said the town is making the move to annex “without any regard” for El Prado Water and Sanitation or other stakeholders. “I look at this as a declaration of war,” he said.

Business owner Jeff Brown spoke in defense of the airport, saying medical flights and other community benefits emanate from it. He said airports are a “major driving force” in the economies of other areas.

Former town councilor Gene Sánchez said the county gave the town options besides annexation, but the town refused to listen.

“I never thought I’d live to see the moral fiber of our government melt,” he said. “All good sense has gone down the tubes from this council and mayor ... You win the ‘Black Tuesday’ award. This will come back to bite you, I guarantee.”

Deputy county manager Rick Bellis addressed the commission, saying the county depends heavily on construction and growth in the corridor through El Prado and has spent a lot of time and resources on it. He said nearly every piece of recent commercial and industrial growth has taken place along that road, and he encouraged the town to consider a resolution not to annex further properties in the area.

Town leaders seemed amenable to the idea, though a resolution declaring a moratorium on annexation would be non-binding. Councilor Rudy Abeyta said he hopes the county would agree not to sue the town over the annexation if such a resolution were signed.

“It’s not showing good faith in working with us,” he said of threatened litigation.

County manager Stephen Archuleta requested the town not “push the annexation down our throats.” He argued the county has made good-faith efforts and crafted proposals to try to avoid annexation and blamed the town for failing to engage in dialogue.

“All I’ve ever gotten is 33 questions and, ‘No, we’re going to do this anyway,’” Archuleta said, referring to a list of questions the town sent in response to county proposals.

He and other county officials said litigation is likely, with commissioner Tom Blankenhorn saying annexation will not be as smooth or quick as the town assumes if the matter ends up in court. After the meeting, Archuleta said the county will “absolutely” consider suing to keep the annexation from going forward. “They are forcing our hands,” he said.

Mayor Còrdova and Rodriguez both said uncertainty about county leaders and future actions of the commission made the town hesitant to enter into the agreements it proposed. Rodriguez said he is confident the town would prevail in court if it comes to that, but he hopes the county would not threaten the airport project with a lawsuit.

Còrdova waited silently for the few moments it took for Abeyta to move to proceed with the annexation. The council voted 3-1 in favor, with Silva casting the lone “no” vote. Silva said he hoped with a little more time the “unsettled issues” between the town and county could have been solved