

Planner leaving town department

By Matthew van Buren

The Taos News, 3/28/2013

As the town of Taos discusses changes to the planning department and works to revise its comprehensive plan, interim planning director and long-range planner Matthew Foster has announced he will be leaving his job at the end of the month.

Foster said he has accepted a position as the executive director of Taos Pueblo Housing, where he will work to provide affordable housing to tribal members. "It's the job I had when I first moved to Taos," he said.

Foster said he held the position for a year before taking a job with the town. "I've been with the town for a good eight years," he said.

In his job as long-range planner, Foster has worked to secure grants for affordable housing and other projects, revise the town's Vision 2020 master plan, and work with local business owners and other groups on plans to revitalize the Historic District, among other projects.

Foster said he had been wondering about his next move for the past two years or so, and he felt he wanted to move away from planning. At Taos Pueblo Housing, he said he will help oversee construction and rehabilitation efforts, land development, programs for financing and credit repair, as well as managing several homes.

Foster said his son is a tribal member, and he has many other relations at Taos Pueblo. "The job means a lot to me," he said.

Foster has been serving as the town's interim planning director since Bill Morris left for another job in January. Morris was the fourth department head to resign under town manager Oscar Rodriguez, who was hired May 2012. Morris' departure followed those of public affairs and tourism director Cathy Connelly, facilities director Ron Yachinich and utilities director Amos Torres.

Foster said it is "not at all" the case that he felt pushed out by Rodriguez. "That has nothing to do with it," he said.

Foster said Friday (March 29) will be his last day with the town.

Rodriguez said he is unsure exactly how he plans to address the vacancy, or whether the vacancy will be advertised. "I haven't made that decision yet," he said.

However, Rodriguez said he has worked as a planning director in the past and is experienced in urban planning. He said he has been engaged in the department “a lot, anyway,” and can help oversee it until a more permanent solution is found.

“That function will not be unattended,” he said of the planning director position. “It won’t be a terrible change for me.”

The planning department has been under scrutiny recently. During an October 2012 meeting of the Town Council, Rodriguez said the department has suffered from a “lack of continuity,” having gone through nine directors since 2000.

At the October meeting, Councilor Andrew Gonzales said he and Rodriguez had met repeatedly about the department and that major changes need to occur. He said constituents have complained to him about how they were treated while conducting business with the department, and he suggested taking some of the department’s functions online in order to save time for all involved. Mayor Darren Córdova spoke to the importance of customer service, particularly in government, and Councilor Rudy Abeyta said the planning department is “broken” and in need of a “major overhaul.”

At that meeting, Morris spoke to the department’s suffering reputation in the community and said he was working to streamline department processes. There has even been talk recently of merging the town and county planning departments.

The planning department will also be moved from its current offices in Town Hall to make room for the Taos Police Department.