

## Town, county look to merge planning

By J.R. Logan and Matthew van Buren

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Town manager Oscar Rodriguez said the town and county are drafting a “contract for services” that would make current Deputy Taos County manager Richard Bellis a joint town/ county planner.

“Hopefully it will be ready to be signed tomorrow (April 4),” he said. “We’ve been talking about this now for some time.”

The county commission discussed the issue at its meeting Tuesday (April 3).

Commissioners left it up to the town to come up with a contract, and they made no formal decision on whether to move forward with the merger.

Both governments have said joining planning departments could save taxpayers money while promoting cooperation between the two entities.

It’s unclear whether a threatened lawsuit over annexation and disagreement over the fate of emergency dispatch will affect the success of operating a joint planning department.

Taos County currently has no planning director, and the town’s planning department is now running with minimal staff and no department head. Rodriguez said he is waiting to fill vacant positions pending the outcome of discussions with the county.

A draft of a contract Bellis provided to the town lays out the following agreement: Bellis would work month-to-month for the town for an initial term of 90 days, including supervising staff, attending meetings, providing presentations and performing other duties. The town would make monthly payments to the county for half of Bellis’ compensation, including salary, taxes and benefits. If the county were to agree, the town could also request the use of other county staff to support its planning department and reimburse the county based on staff members’ hourly compensation, including wages, taxes and benefits.

Town attorney Brian James said he only received the draft late Tuesday afternoon (April 2), but it still needs to be converted from “concepts” to an enforceable contract.

Rodriguez said if the agreement is approved, he would leave Bellis' office arrangements up to him.

"If the work gets done, I don't care where he is," he said.

Rodriguez said he proposed combining planning departments under Bellis before the county reinstated his position in January. The county commission eliminated Bellis' post last December, but the commission reversed its decision the following month, after two new commissioners — Tom Blankenhorn and Gabriel Romero — took their seats.

Rodriguez said he met with Bellis and county manager Stephen Archuleta "just days" after Bellis was rehired, and he believes the conversation between the town and county regarding the airport annexation would have been "very different" if an agreement had been inked earlier.

Rodriguez said he envisions bringing Bellis on board, then moving "one step at a time" to establish a full, formal relationship with the county, including figuring out what changes need to be made to the departments, such as making more town planning functions available online.

"We're moving forward," Rodriguez said.

He said he sees the combination of the town and county planning departments as a good platform on which to build greater cooperation between the two bodies on a number of issues. He said the bodies will also be working on a resolution to establish a transparent process for any future annexations along the Highway 64 corridor.

"This is a very good thing," he said.

Rodriguez said the new position could help with town/county collaboration in a number of ways and ensure they are working off of the same information when they have intergovernmental discussions.

"I think the conversation can only be better," he said.