

Town to revisit sign code; changes mulled

By Matthew van Buren

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The town of Taos is “going back to the drawing board,” in the words of former long-range planner Matthew Foster, with its sign code.

In presentations to the Historic Preservation Commission and Taos Town Council in late March, Foster discussed proposed changes to the sign code and asked for feedback. However, he also asked the bodies not to approve the code, as he said it was still a “work in progress.”

Town manager Oscar Rodriguez told the Town Council March 26 that the sign code had been tabled “a number of times” and that new information had come to light that will require further changes to the draft.

Rodriguez explained that the town had identified places along Paseo del Pueblo Sur where signs could be placed temporarily and, in the town’s estimation, safely; however, he said the state Transportation Department opposed those efforts by the town, as the right of way along that road is controlled by the state.

The council’s discussion ranged widely, however, from political signs to commercial banners. Foster said the town is hoping to craft a code that respects free speech, encourages business development, promotes compatible design, limits clutter and gives staff the authority to enforce it while not giving code enforcement officers too much discretion, among other aims. He said further review by the public and council will be helpful in tailoring the best ordinance for Taos. The draft of the code deals with both permanent signs and temporary ones, such as banners and A-frame signs. It would allow each business to display up to three signs, with a combined maximum of 60 square feet for permanent signs. Individual freestanding signs could be a maximum of 40 square feet in area and 20 feet in height. It lays out other criteria, such as limiting the size of banners, wall-mounted signs and window signs.

The draft code also lists signs that would be prohibited, including billboards; signs that flash, blink, rotate or vary their degrees of internal illumination; signs with mechanically moving parts; signs that incorporate audio devices; commercial flagpole signs; inflatable signs; commercial sign walker signs; signs that project above a roofline, eave or parapet; signs that are unsafe or obstruct pedestrians; and signs that incorporate the words “stop,” “danger” or similar phrases or symbols.

Foster said he has been hearing from members of the public that “we do not want to become Espanola.”

“The signage is one key indicator for that trend,” he said. “I really believe that the town is becoming littered with signs.”

Foster said it is in the interest of the town to manage the number, type and size of signs so the community does not become “blighted by signs.”

Councilors discussed trying to restrict types of signs while still enabling businesses to advertise. The draft code proposed time limitations for temporary signs, allowing businesses to place permitted banners and A-frame signs for up to 90 days twice a year, with 30-day periods in between, but councilors took issue with those provisions. Mayor Darren Córdova said it would likely create an “enforcement issue,” and Councilor Rudy Abeyta suggested only allowing things like banners and A-frame signs to stay up during business hours.

Town attorney Brian James said the town simply doesn’t have the staff to ensure businesses remove their temporary signs at the close of business, or when their time limitations were up. “We just don’t have the staff to keep track of this,” he said.

James also recommended the town leave campaign signs alone during election season, saying no legal tack the town could take against political signs would be likely to succeed in court. James also said the town will be as “broad” and “uninhibiting” as possible when it comes to protest signs. Pre-existing, non-conforming signs would need to come into compliance either if they are replaced or altered in the case of permanent signs, or within 30 days for temporary signs under the draft.

James said a draft can be ready for the council to review at its April 23 meeting, though he pointed to the lack of staff that will be working on it.

Foster left his town post at the end of last month; the town and county are currently working out an agreement to combine planning departments. Rodriguez said he expects the sign code to be ready for another council review later this month.