

Roundtable covers well-worn themes in economic development

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We need to improve education. We need to diversify beyond tourism. We need a skilled workforce. We need an airport. Most of all, we need to work together.

Leaders in business, government and nonprofit sectors came up with a familiar list of solutions to the challenges facing the Taos economy during a roundtable Tuesday evening (May 21). The discussion was the first step in a renewed push to rethink business in Taos and address long-standing hurdles to building the local economy.

Looking at the raw numbers, the Taos economy has taken a beating since the onset of the recession. Overall, business activity in Taos County has contracted by 10 percent since 2006. The construction industry alone shrunk 42 percent, shedding more than 500 jobs over the same period. The real estate market took a similar nose dive and is only now showing some signs of life.

“Business is not good,” said Matt Spriggs of LeapPartners, a business consulting firm contracted by the town to facilitate the discussion on economic development.

The big question Tuesday was how to turn things around. Perhaps not surprisingly, there wasn't a simple answer.

Aside from construction and real estate, tourism has long be a pillar of the Taos economy. Since 1984, tourism-related industries in Taos have hovered at about the same level, though they dipped slightly amid the recession.

Taos Inn Marketing Director Jamie Tedesco says his business attracts a lot of repeat traffic through aggressive marketing, though it has had to reduce its rates to compete in a depressed economy.

Part of the challenge Taos has faced is finding a way to market itself and deciding who to target. Recent promotions like the Remarkable Women campaign were broad enough to highlight these and other reasons to visit Taos. Several members of the panel said similar approaches help keep Taos on travelers' radar.

While most agree that tourism remains a valuable industry, community leaders have long acknowledged the need to diversify the economy into areas like technology.

Oban Lambie, owner of Taos-based Brown Rice Internet, explained his company has managed to grow 10 percent every year since 2008, and does about \$750,000 a year in business activity.

Lambie said the forthcoming broadband network being installed by Kit Carson Electric Cooperative will “add to the allure” of Taos as a great place to set up shop. For his business, Lambie expects the fiber optic system to reduce his Internet access costs and improve his bottom line.

The trouble, Lambie said, is his inability to find capable employees. “My skilled workers are extremely well paid for Taos, and I can’t find them,” Lambie said.

In order to grow, Lambie said he may have to expand to Albuquerque where there’s a larger pool of employees to draw from. He said such a move would be a “shame,” but without qualified staff, he has no other option.

Complaint about a lack of skilled employees is nothing new in Taos. Kate O’Neill, executive director of UNM-Taos, said the community college is investing in programs for nurses and teachers to train residents in practical fields that, at the same time, benefit the community as a whole.

The nursing program at UNM-Taos is often highlighted as an example of successful community collaboration. Graduates from the nursing program often go straight from school to Holy Cross Hospital.

As Taos’ population skews older, Holy Cross CEO Peter Hofstetter said health care will continue to grow as an industry and employ more Taosenos.

A common theme over the two-hour discussion was the need for the entire community to work together — something Taos isn’t exactly known for. The most recent example is the fracas between the town and the county.

Elected officials made overtures for cooperation at the start of the year, but talks quickly broke down and the county is now suing the town over a proposed annexation. The suit could derail an \$24 million, federally funded expansion at the Taos Regional Airport —a project both governments say is important.

Some members of the panel appeared frustrated by the gridlock.

Christopher Madrid, who works with the Taos Entrepreneurial Network to support small businesses, told the government officials their role was to unify the community.