

Town questions effectiveness of Arts and Cultural District

By Matthew van Buren

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The word “deliverables” was on the Taos town counselors’ lips Tuesday (June 25) as they called into question the value of the Arts and Cultural District in its current incarnation.

Town manager Oscar Rodriguez said he had the item placed on the agenda so he could show the council “where we are” and “hear my thinking on this.” He said the town needs a “strong, viable” Arts and Cultural District (ACD) but that, after nearly five years, “we still have a ways to go.”

The Arts and Cultural District is focused on promoting economic development through Taos’ arts and cultural assets. The town budgeted about \$50,000 for the district in the coming fiscal year.

Rodriguez said the town has several options going forward, including contracting with the Arts and Cultural District directly, though he said the organization is still waiting to receive its tax-exempt status from the IRS, contracting with a third party that would act as a fiscal agent, or issuing a request for proposals and allowing other groups to submit plans.

While the Arts and Cultural District awaits another town contract, it will continue to work on ongoing projects.

Rodr’guez said if the town were to contract with another entity, the Arts and Cultural District’s state-recognized status would not transfer to the new organization and the town would stand to lose state support, which he said has mainly come in the form of studies and “technical assistance.”

He said he hopes for greater involvement and direction from the town in the future, including setting quantifiable goals, overseeing progress and helping the Arts and Cultural District to become more self-sufficient.

Councilor Andrew Gonzales said the Arts and Cultural District is supposed to be a public-private partnership, and he wondered where the private contributions come in and how they are measured.

Matthew Foster, former town long-range planner and chairman of the ACD board, said private businesses in Taos donate in-kind services and time, and they could help sponsor events and fundraisers as well as participate in a system of direct funding.

“We think we have a pretty strong board, and we represent a pretty broad spectrum of the community,” he said.

Foster emphasized the importance of strengthening the relationship among the Arts and Cultural District, the town and the state, saying Taos’ district has been described as “exemplary” and held up as an example for others in the state that are “much further behind” than Taos’.

ACDs began to be created following the passage of the Arts and Cultural District Act in 2007. Foster said he understands the town’s concerns but said fundraising in Taos is tough. He said he sees the “best case” scenario as one in which the town contracts with the Arts and Cultural District directly as a “sole source” provider under the state procurement code.

State law allows public entities to award contracts without seeking competitive bids if only one source for the required service is determined to exist. However, town attorney Brian James said he has reservations about using the sole source procurement law in that way.

New Mexico MainStreet Director Rich Williams said “sole source” has been traditionally used for ACDs and MainStreet programs in the state. He praised Taos’ Arts and Cultural District as having come a long way with a lot of state investment in planning and development, seeking grants and creating bylaws and helping the district with its tax-exempt status.

“At this point we’ve put in a remarkable amount of time,” he said. “I think it’s a great program.”

He said it “takes a while for an organization to get up and running,” but the next step in Taos is to begin with programming. Williams said if the town were to contract with another entity, “We would probably no longer support that.” He said he understands the council’s concerns.

“We would be very disappointed to lose them as partners,” he said. Councilor Michael Silva said he supports a strategic plan and setting up a way to monitor the district’s progress more closely, but he would not support an RFP.