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County may share Arts and Cultural District costs

By J.R. Logan

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In an effort to sustain a program dedicated to building a creative economy downtown, Taos County appears willing to become a partner with the town of Taos in funding the Taos Arts and Cultural District.

The town has budgeted about \$50,000 a year since the Arts and Cultural District was established a five years ago. But the town council has recently expressed reservations about continuing to fund the program, in part because officials say the district has not provided tangible results.

Arts and Cultural District board members counter that the organization has been recognized as one of the strongest programs in the state, and that the organization continues to push for cultural programming while seeking grant funding for capital improvements.

The district is currently preparing a "downtown master plan" that will identify specific projects that could then be funded with grants.

But Rich Williams, director of the New Mexico MainStreet Program, said the town's reluctance to continue the program has led the state to threaten to pull \$70,000 in funding for the downtown master plan.

The district was awarded the grant in March 2012 and had hoped to have the plan finished and approved by April of this year.

Overall, Williams said the Arts and Cultural District in Taos is in limbo until the funding situation is resolved. "Everybody is just kind of posturing, and we need to get past that," Williams said.

Williams estimated that the Taos Arts and Cultural District has received about \$150,000 in grants and in-kind services from the state.

By expressing an interest in sharing the operations costs, deputy county manager Richard Bellis said the county hoped to salvage the program.

"It really seemed like a shame to see years of really good work to bring the downtown alive just disappear," Bellis told the county commission at a meeting Tuesday (July 9).

Commissioners made no official decision Tuesday but they asked that the item be considered at a future meeting.

As a part of the pitch to pick up the arts and cultural district, Bellis said the county has an interest in ensuring that the local economy is thriving, and teaming up on the district could lead to other public-private economic development efforts involving both the town and county.

Bellis said the county's share of the arts and cultural district budget could be paid for with lodgers tax funds — taxes charged by hotels that are earmarked for tourism and marketing promotion.

Becoming a partner in the arts and cultural district may also mean the county could seek new funds to restore its Old Courthouse on Taos Plaza.

The county's application for \$500,000 in community development block grant funds to restore the courthouse was denied.

The first floor of the courthouse is currently occupied by small businesses, but the county commission recently voted to encourage community art centers and other public service groups to use the facility.

The Taos Entrepreneurial Network has also expressed an interest in using space in the building as a business incubator and to promote economic development.