



Taos County shows early signs of action on disputed land use code

By J.R. Logan

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Taos County is laying the groundwork to revisit a controversial land use code that was punted by the previous commission after a contentious series of hearings in January 2012.

While no formal dates have yet been set, the county expects to hold public hearings on the issue in the coming months.

About 20 citizens slogged through dozens of minor changes to the proposed code at informal meeting Monday evening (July 8). The changes have been suggested by residents who have been meeting with county commissioner Tom Blankenhorn to offer input on the new regulations.

The meetings to review those changes are slated to continue every Monday at 5:30 p.m. in the county commission chambers.

In the first 45 minutes of discussion Monday, attendees debated several issues, such as the number of people who should sit on the planning and zoning commission, and the difference between the definition of “agricultural” and “agro-industrial” uses. Even in the minutiae of these details, it was clear that opinions widely varied among the small group. In many cases, the pros and cons of an issue were discussed without finding any clear middle ground.

When and if the county holds hearings to consider approving the entire code later this year, it's likely that the debate will be equally heated.

The proposed land use code (available for download at taosnews.com) is meant to clean up the existing ordinance, which most county officials believe is flawed.

The code requires most new business go through a costly and time-consuming permit process that officials worry is hindering economic development. The current code also calls for an administrative process that ultimately leaves most planning decisions up to the county commission — something that has led to several controversial and highly politicized votes on development.

As part of the new code, county staff have relied on individual neighborhood associations to draft their own zoning plans. The plans would dictate where residential, commercial and other uses would

be allowed. For more than six years, the county has been in the process of working with resident volunteers to draft a new code. But when the commission held a week of hearings in January 2012 leading up to a vote, more than 100 people showed up on the last day, many of

whom argued that they'd been left out of the process or had not been given adequate notice.

A contingent from the Arroyo Seco area was even pushing for the county to translate the 181-page document into Spanish.

Amid a tumultuous hearing, then-commission chairman Joe Mike Durán made a motion to 'drop' the issue altogether, eliciting applause from opponents and deflating those who had been working on the document.

The county briefly revisited the issue in August 2012, when it considered a change to the current code that would allow zoning maps from neighborhood associations to be adopted into the existing code.

At that hearing, Durán said he'd like to punt the issue until commissioners Blankenhorn and Gabriel Romero (both elected in the June primaries) took office. "We've got two new commissioners coming in," Durán said after the August hearing. "We'll have them deal with it."

During their campaigns, both Romero and Blankenhorn expressed a clear desire to pass a new land use code if elected.

Commission Dan Barrone has also said he supports a new code, while Durán and commissioner Larry Sánchez both voted against it last year.