



Teaming up to reinvigorate old courthouse

By J.R. Logan

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In an effort to revitalize a largely vacant landmark downtown, local governments are teaming up with business leaders to bring life back to the old county courthouse.

“Our vision is to make this the focal point of downtown,” said Taos County Commission Chairman Dan Barrone.

Since the county offices were abandoned in 1970, officials have been searching for a way to put the building to good use. While it has been hailed as an “anchor” that could bring life back to Taos Plaza, a series of lawsuits combined with political squabbling between the town and county has left much of the building empty for decades.

Renewed collaboration could change that.

The “Old Courthouse Development Initiative” is being billed as a joint effort between Taos County, the town of Taos, the Taos Entrepreneurial Network, The Taos MainStreet and Arts and Cultural District, and Kit Carson Electric Cooperative.

Barrone has long been advocate for bringing life to the building, which is home to the old jail (used in a scene from *Easy Rider*) and the former courtroom adorned with a series of murals dating back to the 1930s. Since 2000, the county has appointed two committees to come up with ideas on how to use the building. Both groups made similar suggestions — create a museum, start a cultural center — but their plans were shelved.

That’s a pattern Steve Fuhlendorf, who was among those who came up with suggestions, would like to see change. “We’re not putting a plan together then not doing anything about it,” Fuhlendorf said. “We’re just moving forward.”

Fuhlendorf is public information officer for Kit Carson Electric Cooperative, which installed fiber optic cable in the building ahead of last week’s fiestas. Demonstration computers were set up during the festivities to show off the Internet speeds and give the public a glimpse at the rarely seen parts of the courthouse.

Fuhlendorf is also a board member of the Taos Entrepreneurial Network, which plans to set up a business resource center. The goal is to provide a space where the local business community can take advantage of the broadband Internet connection. Fuhlendorf said the center will offer things like computer access and copier services at free or affordable rates.

“We want to give locals a reason to come back to the Plaza and the business resource center is the first step in doing that,” Fuhlendorf said.

Daniel Peralta with the Small Business Development Center is also planning to hold office hours on the second floor to provide advice to entrepreneurs.

The Taos Arts and Cultural District intends to set up office space on the second floor. Coordinator Cindy Spray said there will be meeting space available as well as a work area that will be open to the public. "Anyone who wants to get something done downtown can come on up," Spray said.

Collaborating on filling the building is only the first step in a long term plan to restore parts of the building that are in disrepair. In recent years, the county has replaced parts of the building's heating and cooling system and it has done minor repairs to the facade. The state recently denied a grant application for \$500,000 for additional work on the building.



Tina Larkin

Guests of the old Taos County Courthouse get a guided tour of the courthouse murals in this file photo. Government and business leaders are working to reopen much of the building so it can be used for business development and cultural activities.