



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## State pulls \$75K grant for downtown plan

By J.R. Logan

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The state has clawed back \$70,000 in grant funding because the town refused to renew its contract with the Taos Arts and Cultural District. The money was meant to pay a consultant to help create a “downtown master plan” that would have made the town eligible for capital improvement grants.

Members of the Arts and Cultural District Board say the loss of the money is a “huge step back” and directly linked to the town government’s inaction. Town officials counter that there are legal issues preventing them from contracting with the existing district, and argue that the amount of future grant money is minimal.

The revocation of the plan funding came weeks after the town and county were talking about a deal under which both governments would support the Arts and Cultural District.

An Aug. 2 letter from Deputy Taos County Manager Rick Bellis to the state describes a tentative agreement between the town and county under which both governments would provide \$40,000 for the Arts and Cultural District. Bellis referenced a June 25 letter from the state in which the threat of pulling funding was made, and Bellis asked that the decision to revoke funding be held off until Aug. 20 so an agreement between the town and county was worked out. An email from the state shows that officials agreed to extend the deadline.

However, a town/county agreement never came to fruition. The county commission approved an agreement at an Oct. 15 meeting — four days after the state sent a letter revoking funding. The town council has not formally considered the agreement.

Bellis told the Arts and Cultural District Committee at a meeting Wednesday (Oct. 23) there are models in the state under which counties have taken sole ownership of a district, though he said there is a preference to include municipalities.

Bellis said the county was hoping to convince the state to make the county the lead sponsor of the district. If approved, the county-sponsored district would have to reapply for funding for the downtown plan.

Members of the committee expressed frustration with what they saw as stalling from the town. “It really comes down to the town not wanting to play ball,” said committee member Jamie Tedesco.

Town manager Oscar Rodriguez told *The Taos News* the town is not satisfied with the performance of Arts and Cultural District Director Cindy Spray, and may seek to hire a full-time employee who can help another iteration of the district move forward.

Rodriguez says he still has lingering concerns about the legality of the current organization because it is not officially a 501c3.

Spray counters she's met all of the benchmarks listed in her contract. The Arts and Cultural District Committee says it is still seeking official nonprofit status.

When the town was awarded the \$70,000 grant in April 2012, state and town leaders hailed it as a big step toward improving the look and feel of downtown.

"This grant will enable us to complete a Town of Taos downtown, historic district master plan that will then allow us the opportunity to seek new types of capital outlay dollars for this area's infrastructure and other improvements," Mayor Darren Còrdova said in a press release announcing the grant. "Today's award is a critical step forward for the Taos Historic District and our Arts & Cultural District, and we thank Governor Martinez, Secretary Barela and New Mexico MainStreet Director Rich Williams for their belief in Taos."

Còrdova said in an interview Tuesday (Oct. 22) losing funding for the plan did not mean the town would stand to lose that much because capital outlay funding has been thin in recent years. "I don't think that's going to be a major setback," he said. "I want to see what those repercussions are."

The Legislature approved about \$1 million in capital outlay funding for the state's MainStreet program for fiscal 2013. The money is shared by MainStreet and Arts and Cultural programs in the state.

Rich Williams, director of the New Mexico MainStreet program, could not be reached before press time.

*The Taos News* requested all correspondence received or sent by town staff regarding the downtown master plan funding. That request was not fulfilled before press time.