

Business owners, town talk Taos tourism and marketing

By Elizabeth Cleary

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Taos business owners and community members packed the Old County Courthouse April 24 to share thoughts on Taos' tourism and marketing efforts.

Town of Taos manager Rick Bellis, who moderated the discussion, told the group the town wanted to make decisions about how to promote Taos in a more transparent way and in a more "intimate setting."

"Think of this as a dialogue," he said.

Joanie Griffin, of Griffin and Associates, the marketing firm the town has contracted with for the last few years to promote tourism in Taos, gave a presentation at the meeting highlighting her firm's progress during the past fiscal year.

Griffin receives a budget of just under \$400,000 per year from the town.

Griffin said the firm has not only met many of its marketing goals, but exceeded them by a comfortable margin. For example, she said her goal for fiscal 2014 was to increase visits to the official tourism website, Taos.org, by 10 percent, and so far they have increased by 45 percent. She also said she wanted to increase "A-list" media placement by 10 percent, and so far such placements have increased by 58 percent.

Griffin said the term "A-list" media generally refers to media with national or international audiences. She said this year Taos has made several national lists – it was one of AARP's best places to retire and one of Yahoo's coolest desert towns.

Still, some meeting attendees criticized Griffin's marketing approach, saying the town shouldn't adopt a new tourism theme every year and arguing little evidence exists that shows definitive proof Griffin's efforts are working.

Past years' tourism themes include "Summer of Love" and "Adventures de Taos." This year, Griffin and Associates have a new slogan: "There's a word for it: Taos. Hard to define. Impossible to forget."

The slogan has received mixed reviews among community members, some of whom argue that the slogan is too vague and doesn't properly illustrate Taos' charm.

Griffin said at the meeting that the slogan is meant to be paired with photographs that show Taos in all its glory. On the homepage of the Taos.org website, the slogan appears in front of photos of the ski valley, Taos Pueblo, the Rio Grande and more.

Bellis said it is hard to measure exactly how effective marketing efforts are, and that hotel owners need to make sure they ask every visitor how they heard about Taos and report the results back to the town.

Some meeting attendees asked Griffin why she doesn't concentrate more advertising efforts outside of the "drive circle," or the area that includes New Mexico and its surrounding states as well as California. Griffin explained that her \$400,000 budget isn't big enough to advertise nationally and internationally, and that advertising within the drive circle provides the biggest return on investment.

Meeting attendees also discussed the need to "heal our community" in order to give more tourists a reason to come to Taos.

Problems such as thieves breaking into cars and stealing property when folks hike down to the hot springs by the R'o Grande dissuade tourists from wanting to come back to Taos, they said.

Also, more than one person at the meeting discussed the need for businesses downtown to stay open longer hours and remain open through the weekend in order to create a more inviting atmosphere for tourists.

Chris Pieper, who owns the outdoor apparel shop Mudd 'n' Fludd, suggested the town consider opening an acequia museum that would teach tourists about the centuries- old irrigation system Taos uses. "Taos is a place where people come to learn," he said.

Cisco Guevara, who owns the rafting guide company Los R'os River Runners, discussed the harmful effects the alfalfa industry in southern Colorado has not only on his business but on the tourism industry in Taos as a whole.

He says alfalfa sucks up too much water from the Rio Grande, leaving too little for rafting down here in Taos.

Taos should be a rafting destination, he said, where people come to raft, stay in hotels and eat at restaurants. When there isn't enough water they stop doing that, and it has adverse effects on the whole community.

Stuart Wilde, who owns Wild Earth Llama Adventures, said it's important for every Taos business owner who caters to tourists to make sure they provide a "five-star" experience.

He said the community can't rely on just the town's marketing efforts to draw in tourists, and that business owners need to put the responsibility back on themselves to draw tourists.

"If every single aspect of the experience is five star, they'll come back," he said. "... We're all in this together."

