



THE TAOS NEWS

Best U.S. Weekly Paper- NNA 2007, 2008, 2010
Inland Press Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

County commission OKs Blackstone Ranch permit

By Cody Hooks

The Taos News, 8/28/2014

Taos County commissioners overturned Tuesday (Aug. 19) the planning commission's denial of a major development permit for Blackstone Ranch, an environmental institute and corporate retreat center in Taos.

Blackstone Ranch is a "luxurious" 23-bedroom house sitting on 168 acres off State Road 240. Though the ranch was zoned as residential, it was allowed by a county-approved 2008 application to have guests at the house by invitation-only and without charging for services.

In June, Blackstone Ranch applied for a change to their major development permit, requesting approval for for-profit operations at the ranch. The ranch would charge groups for staying at the ranch and for meals from the commercial kitchen, and possibly alcohol. Adam Baker, attorney for Blackstone Ranch, said the ranch needed commercial ventures to generate some revenue to financially support their other agricultural operations. Baker said it was "not clear why the [planning] commission denied the application" in June, and he called their decision "arbitrary and capricious."

Blackstone Ranch applied and was approved for its first building permit in 2004. In 2008, the ranch applied and was approved for a major development permit, which Baker said "effectively turned Blackstone Ranch into a conference center."

Baker further said that operations at Blackstone Ranch, while not generating any revenue, are "hallmarks of commercial use."

From 2008 to 2009, at the request of the Taos County Commission, Blackstone Ranch brought the 23-bedroom house up to "R1" occupancy standards mandated for commercial properties.

Much criticism has been leveled against Blackstone Ranch, especially for its application to drill a 450-foot well last year. Jay Lazarus, the hydrologist contracted by Blackstone to oversee water use at the ranch, said the property currently has two domestic wells, two livestock wells and surface water rights on three acequias. Lazarus said the current water supply was sufficient to meet the needs of the ranch's agricultural and commercial ventures, even when the main house is at full occupancy, or 46 people.

Representatives for Blackstone Ranch reiterated many times over that the ranch is a "group retreat center," and that individuals would not be allowed to rent rooms. Instead, all guests would be part of large groups. Richard Lavelle, manager of Blackstone's operations via the management firm Atomic MGT, said that a usual group size would be about 30 people. He estimated that for an average group staying an average of three or four days, Blackstone Ranch would generate between \$80,000 to \$90,000 per group.

While Taos would no doubt reap some degree of financial benefit from the commercial activities of Blackstone Ranch, including revenue from taxes and that associated with tourism, as well as the benefit of up to 20 more full-time employees, several Taos residents did have concerns and objections.

Resident Tom Urban said he “begs to differ” with claims there would be no substantial impact on the community. Members of the public also suggested Blackstone Ranch be held to their long-term vision of sustainable agriculture.

After meeting in executive session, Taos County commissioners approved the change to Blackstone’s permit to allow commercial ventures at the property — with a number of conditions.

These conditions include requiring the Blackstone Ranch to improve parking spaces, protect against unnecessary lighting and glare, allow access through State Road 240 only, and deal appropriately with solid waste. The conditions reiterated that this approval of permit change does not allow any new construction, nor does it allow for individuals to rent suites.

Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn added several other conditions, including that food and drink is to be available only to guests and not the public. Blankenhorn further stipulated “all open space on the property will continue to be actively used to promote and engage in sustainable agricultural practices, and agricultural production and education.”

Staff at the county planning department will formalize all the conditions in writing and present them for final approval at the next county commission meeting.