



Town identifies \$60M in projects but funding an uncertainty

By J.R. Logan

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If money were no object, the first thing the Taos Town Council would do is spend \$1.9 million to give Taos Plaza a complete makeover.

Plaza reconstruction is at the top of a five-year capital projects priority list approved by the town council Sept. 11. In all, the town says it has almost \$60 million of infrastructure work to do by 2020. To see a copy of the list, find this story at taosnews.com.

Where most of the money will come from, however, isn't clear.

The town relies almost entirely on grant funding and capital outlay from the state Legislature to cover the costs of these kinds of projects. But last year, the town got just \$230,000 from the Legislature — \$50,000 of which was earmarked for a hangar at the airport.

Aside from a \$23 million federal grant to expand the airport (which has been in limbo for decades), that sort of funding has languished. The town also was unable to apply for up to \$500,000 in block grant funds last year because it had not yet finished a project funded from the same pot of money.

"That's why we're looking for a top-flight grant writer," said Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis in an interview Wednesday (Sept. 17), noting that the town has been without someone in that position for a while. "When you're drowning, the first thing you shouldn't get rid of is your life preserver."

The town's capital projects list — known as the "Infrastructure Capital Improvements Plan" — is broken down by department, but the four main areas cited for funding include downtown projects, the airport, roads, and the Taos Youth and Family Center.

Because of the grant for the airport, there are nearly \$22 million worth of projects at the airport on the list, including the construction of airport hangars and improving the airport water system. While 95 percent of the cost for most of the work will be covered by the feds and state, the town will be on the hook for about \$1.1 million through 2020.

Compare that with about \$700,000 worth of work needed at the Taos Youth and Family Center, including roof repairs and re-plastering. Those projects are further down the list than much of the airport items, but staff at the center have said the repairs will be needed soon or the facility could risk closing or ceasing some services.

Bellis says the ranking on the list is less a reflection of importance and more a reflection of available money.

"The projects that rank higher already have some money behind them," Bellis said. "The money is already there. The engineering is already there. It's going to happen."

Despite the controversy that's erupted over the airport expansion, Bellis argues the town will essentially break even on its match. Tax revenues from construction will cover most of the match expense, and a \$5 million contract was awarded to a local contractor last week to do the work.

Part of the problem the town faces is that it may be spread too thin. The town currently owns 69 insured structures. Some of these the town occupies and uses, while others are leased to community groups like Community Against Violence or Ancianos. Lease agreements with these groups typically put the responsibility of maintenance on the lessor, but there are now questions about whether the rents being paid are enough to cover the town's costs.

For that reason, Bellis added a \$350,000 for a complete assessment and appraisal of town buildings to the capital improvements list. Such an inventory is needed so the town can make smarter decision about where to put its money, Bellis argues.

Going forward, Bellis said the town may need to reconsider how it spends money on services that benefit residents who live outside the town limits — a familiar mantra from the previous administration.

"We've got to take a regional approach to some of these services," Bellis said, "We cannot fund everything in the world."