

Town to interview for vacant planning director post

By J.R. Logan

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The town of Taos says it will begin interviewing candidates this week to fill a planning director positions that's been vacant for more than three months.

The currently empty desk follows more than a decade of internal problems and high turnover, but town officials are now proposing a new direction for the beleaguered department.

Martha Perkins, the town's most recent planning director, was hired in July 2013 by the previous town administration. Officials at the time said they were looking for a candidate to fix a "broken" planning department that needed a "major overhaul." Perkins resigned this summer after a year on the job.

That kind of short stint is not unusual.

In October 2012, then-planning director William Morris acknowledged that the department had deficiencies. In a presentation to the town council, he cited problems like lack of training, low accountability and poor customer service.

Former town manager Oscar Rodriguez noted at the time the department had seen nine planning directors since 2000, and had been without a director for a prolonged period at least twice.

Three months after giving his presentation to the council, Morris resigned. His temporary replacement, Matt Foster, left his job as long-range planner four months later. The post then went unfilled for four months until Perkins was hired.

Aside from the top post, total staffing in the planning department has also dwindled.

In fiscal 2012, the town spent \$471,117 on employee salaries and benefits in the planning department. By fiscal 2014, that dropped to \$253,752 after the staff was cut to a skeleton crew. This year, the town budgeted \$409,000 for employees in the department, though there are still only two full-time employees there. In addition the the director post, the town is advertising two planner positions that have yet to be filled.

The revolving door at the head of the planning department doesn't appear to be affecting interest from candidates. The town posted an advertisement for a "planning, community and economic development director" Aug. 1. It had received 39 applications as of Nov. 3.

Among the applicants are former long-range planner Foster (who has been working for Taos Pueblo since he left the town) and Patrick Nicholson, a Taos planning consultant. To see a complete list of applicants, find this story at taosnews.com.

When Perkins resigned, town manager Rick Bellis said it might reopen discussions of creating a joint town/ county planning department. However Bellis said in an email Wednesday (Nov. 12) there has been no “high-level dialogue” about a merger.

Instead, Bellis said the planning department now can handle the day-to-day permit and zoning stuff, but he’d like to see the planning department refocus.

“We are positioned to handle the normal traffic but are more interested building the capacity here to attract and develop real impact economic development, and planning and carrying out large scale infrastructure projects, especially parks, trails, recreation, upgrades in aging utilities and the plaza,” Bellis wrote. “We appear to have spent a lot of our staff time and public resources in [the planning department] adding value to properties for local Realtors and developers, and to some extent local property investors, without actually creating any new jobs or value to the economy.”

Bellis stressed the need for a master plan to dictate future development to keep developers from dictating the landscape “lot-by-lot.”