

## Reopening Penasco health center may have political backing

By Andrew Oxford

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A community health and wellness center in Penasco may be brought back to life after closing nearly three years ago.

The Picuris-Penasco Community Coalition has expressed interest in reopening The S.P.O.T.

A letter from the coalition last month to members of the Taos County Board of Commissioners suggested the reopened facility could serve as a hub for health services in the outlying community as it did from 2004 to 2012.

The nonprofit coalition opened The S.P.O.T. in what was once Penasco's post office to serve as an information center helping local residents navigate the health care system and public services while also serving as a venue for counseling, meetings, parenting classes, a food bank, a youth farming project and wellness programs. If re-opened, the first year would be a year of assessment to examine the community's needs and determine priorities, according to the letter.

The letter, which included a draft budget of \$331,000 over three years, comes as county leaders are expected to decide how to spend a surplus of more than \$1 million in gross receipts taxes designated for indigent health care.

Bolstering calls to reopen the facility, the plans have the backing of incoming Taos County Commissioner Candyce O'Donnell, who has indicated she would support using a chunk of the county's surplus indigent fund monies to reopen The S.P.O.T.

If it is reopened, O'Donnell suggested the program could serve as a model to be replicated in other outlying communities such as Amalia.

"That's my hope," O'Donnell told *The Taos News* last month. "This could be ratcheted up."

O'Donnell, who will represent Penasco and much of southern Taos County when she starts her four-year term in January, is not the only one backing plans to reopen S.P.O.T.

In its letter to commissioners, the Picuris-Penasco Community Coalition said it gathered more than 100 signatures in support of reopening S.P.O.T. during its annual health fair in October.

It is not clear whether the program would qualify for county funding under its narrow definition of indigent health care, however.

Carol Miller, one of The S.P.O.T.'s founders, suggested Taos Health Systems could also support the facility's operating budget with funds provided by a national foundation for services in Penasco.

The hospital became fiscal agent for Picuris-Penasco Community Coalition in 2009 and managed a major grant from the Kresge Foundation, a national nonprofit supporting community health projects across the country.

The grant initially totaled more than \$750,000 and included an additional \$150,000 this year. Though some of that money supported The S.P.O.T., Taos Health Systems severed its relationship with the center in 2011, leading to its closure in early 2011.

The political and financial wrangling also led to a falling out between some involved with the organization and Taos Health Systems.