



## Farmers market debate resurfaces days before season's start

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The Taos Town Council will likely reconsider whether to allow the Taos Farmers Market to take place on Taos Plaza this summer.

The town council is expected to discuss the issue and may vote on whether to move the market at its meeting May 12. The council already voted last August and again in January to keep the market on the Plaza.

The renewed debate over the location comes just days before the market is set to begin its season. The year-long controversy has divided merchants in the historic district and led to increasingly personal attacks against business owners and politicians.

"It makes me want to run and hide in the mountains," said a harried Mayor Dan Barrone in an interview Tuesday (May 5).

Barrone said he's sympathetic to the growing chorus of merchants who claim hosting the market on the Plaza is killing their businesses. That chorus includes negative comments from business owners with whom the mayor is personal friends.

However, Barrone remains insistent that having the market at the Plaza is the best for the greater good. "It really hurts," Barrone said of the antagonism. "But I'm just trying to do the best for the whole community."

That stance doesn't offer much solace to Tammy King, who's owned Sunshades & Optics of Taos on the Plaza since 2009. King said Friday (May 1) business has been tough since the onset of the recession, and she calls the negative effects of having the market in front of her store a "double-whammy."

"You've got the mayor saying, 'Business is bad for everyone,'" King said. "Yeah, it is bad for everyone, so why are you trying to make our business worse than it already is? We've clearly stated that it's not working."

Like other merchants opposed to the Plaza location, King said farm vendors that set up in front of her store make it invisible to passersby. And like other merchants, she says the congestion downtown during market hours drives away people who'd otherwise be in her store. She points to log books of sales that show Saturday mornings during the summer are dead until the market ends. She says she tried to lure market shoppers into the store, but with little success.

In all, King says sales were off 10 percent last year compared with 2013. Staff hours have been cut, and she's seriously considering closing altogether, especially if the market isn't moved.

"It's a nice ambiance on the Plaza, but I went to the farmers market when it was in the other location as well, and it was just as nice over there without the detrimental effects," King says.

King acknowledged the market isn't the only factor making it tough to turn a profit, but she does think it's the "death knell."

Since the debate over the market erupted, there have been at least three surveys of downtown merchants attempting to gauge the attitude of nearby businesses. The first survey, done for a merchant opposed to the market, found three-quarters of those surveyed wanted the market moved. A second survey, done by farmers market associates, found 82 percent were in favor of the Plaza location. King recently did her own survey and found about 61 percent wanted the market moved. Each survey asked different questions of different businesses.

The inconsistency of those three surveys highlights one of the key challenges in the debate — it's almost impossible to gather hard data to determine whether having a market on the Plaza is good or bad for business in general.

For instance, there's no way to pin down whether tax revenue or hotel stays increase or decrease on specific days, or even specific weeks. It's also hard to generalize about the affect the Plaza location has on nearby merchants. Even among those businesses that are for or against the Plaza market, there's a lot of different reasons why.

Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis acknowledges that getting hard data on the economic impact of the market is tough. But he thinks the benefits aren't just measured in dollars.

"It creates a social and economic dynamic that goes beyond just selling vegetables," Bellis says. Bellis said he believes merchants like King when they say their businesses are suffering. But he thinks there are a lot more variables at play than a seasonal Saturday market. Bellis also argues any business that can be "sent into the toilet" because of an event that eats up a few hours a day, once a week for a few months is "not a sustainable model."

If the market stays, and businesses don't adapt Bellis says some might go under. But he thinks that would also be the case if the town sits on its hands and does nothing to make Taos a more attractive and fun place to visit.

"Business has sucked since at least 2008," Bellis said. "So if we do absolutely nothing, there will be business casualties. And if we do something, there will be casualties. But at least we know this is a model that absolutely generates traffic."

Kara Williams, owner of Taos Mountain Outfitters on the Plaza's northside, is a big supporter of keeping the market on the Plaza. She acknowledges the business climate is tough — she said her business was also down last year — but she thinks that's in part because her store moved locations.

Williams does not think the market hurt her. In fact, she thinks it was a boon, both in sales and in bringing excitement downtown. Williams said Taos Mountain Outfitters went out of its way to open early and offer discounts during the market to take advantage of the big crowds on the

Plaza.

Williams said some things worked and some didn't, but like her business in general, she was constantly making adjustments. She thinks some businesses opposed to the market may not have made the same effort. "I question whether some of these businesses have felt the need to change," Williams said. If the council does chose to remove the market from the Plaza, Williams said she would adapt to that as well. But she would be disappointed, and she wonders if it would reflect the sentiments of the community as a whole.

"It's turned into a shouting match, and whoever's the loudest is going to get their way," Williams said.