



## **UNM-Taos Report**

# **Moving forward on Civic Plaza Drive**

**By Bill Knief**

*The Taos News, 5/7/2015*

Think of education as being like the water in an acequia. First it sustains individuals, then it nourishes families, and then it supports whole communities as it spreads out across the landscape.

When people commit to higher education they not only better themselves, they strengthen the local economy and make it possible for all citizens to share in a richer, more productive life experience.

But for higher education to really take hold, you have to have the facilities that match the skills, the vision and the needs of those citizens. That's why, when you drive past Klauer Campus, you'll see the new Student Success Center rising up out of the sagebrush, or when you walk down Civic Plaza Drive you'll soon see the former Taos Convention Center being transformed into the UNM-Taos Health Careers Training Center.

But nothing of this magnitude comes without challenge. It took a solid 18 months of hard, sometimes frustrating work after the Crdova Administration approved and the Barrone Administration ratified the transfer of R'o Grande and Bataan Halls to UNM-Taos, beginning the process of obtaining all of the necessary approvals and contingencies.

On April 21 the deed to the properties was transferred to UNM-Taos, and on Tuesday, April 22, the State Board of Finance gave its OK to begin spending the \$4.6 million set aside for the remodel of the facilities. So when UNM-Taos Executive Director Dr. Kate O'Neill got back from Santa Fe Tuesday afternoon, I asked her for her thoughts.

"It has been an exhausting process," she said. "I'm suffering from sleep deprivation, excitement and adrenaline rush, all at the same time. This final step in the approval process before the State Board of Finance probably took 15 or 20 minutes, but it seemed like a lifetime, with the fate of the college hanging in the balance. People think that somebody sits in an office here in Taos and decides these things, but there are a lot of key players at UNM in Albuquerque who weigh in first, and then it goes to Santa Fe, all the way up to and including the Governor.

"Tuesday morning we signed in and were escorted into the big conference room with a round table in the center that is literally adjoining the Governor's office on the fourth floor of the Roundhouse. There were about 50 people present including the lieutenant governor, six or

seven members of the State Board of Finance including Tom Clifford, the Cabinet Secretary of the Department of Finance Administration, and their legal counsel and staff, and our team of eight representatives from UNM-Taos and main campus.”

I said that by the time she sat down at that table, the pressure on the team must have been enormous, and O’Neill said it reminded her of when she had to present her dissertation proposal to a committee of 20 Harvard faculty members, some of whom she had never met.

“You have to be able to explain what you are doing from just about any point of view. So I did the proposal, and re-did it, and then I did it again. I think I had about every word footnoted by the time I was done, and they put my proposal on reserve in the library as an example of how it’s done. But with a project like this, you never know where the questions are going to come from, and the discussion can turn in directions you didn’t anticipate it to go. It went smoothly, though, and when it was over we breathed a sigh of relief and went and grabbed some breakfast.

“It’s probably best that we did it the way we did, though, because we were able to make sure the purchase was thoroughly vetted and everything had been dealt with, including parking, storm water drainage, easements, contingencies, permissions, and legal and real estate issues. Now we can kick into high gear, because, thanks to the citizens of Taos County setting aside the half mill Educational Gross Receipts Tax, we have over \$600,000 to put into preliminaries such as construction drawings, and then put it out to bid to contractors.

“It was a very exciting day. UNM-Taos started here on Civic Plaza Drive more than 20 years ago, and now we are assured that we will continue to grow and flourish here, right in the heart of downtown.”

*Bill Knief is a project coordinator at UNM-Taos.*