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Taos, county to tackle list of issues at joint meeting

By J.R. Logan

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A new tax, local building inspections and how to handle animal welfare are among the things to be discussed when town and county officials meet this week.

A joint meeting of the two governments is scheduled Thursday (Oct. 22), and the list of discussion topics is plenty long.

The meeting this week will be the first time the two governments formally meet face-to-face since April 2014.

At the time, Dan Barrone had just been elected mayor (Barrone also happened to be a county commissioner back then), and he was making good on a campaign promise to end several feuds between the town and county. In a matter of weeks, the two governments resolved a spat over the location of emergency dispatch, and figured out a way to pay for the airport expansion that avoided a controversial annexation.

But in the almost 18 months since, there has been no formal get-togethers for town and county leaders to discuss other issues.

Judging by Thursday's agenda, there's a lot to discuss.

The meeting agenda includes eight new topics and seven unresolved issues. Since you'll have 10 elected officials vying to put their two cents in on every topic, don't be surprised if it's an all-day affair.

HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE:

- There's talk of imposing a 1/8 gross receipts tax that would go directly to funding E911 services. Anyone who pays attention to local politics knows E911 has been a serious point of contention between the town and county in the past. For years the two governments have argued about who should pay to ensure someone answers the phone when one calls 911. Multiple reports found that equipment was woefully outdated or in disrepair, making it hard for first responders to hear emergency calls or communicate with dispatchers.

The proposal to impose a new tax to pay for E911 would provide a reliable source of money to cover those expenses that bypasses political bickering. The flip side, of course, is that it's a tax. The tax would be an extra 1.25 cents on a \$10 purchase. Even if the two governments agree the tax is a good idea, they still have to get it past voters.

- The town recently lost its authority to do its own building inspections. Instead of builders turning in paperwork to town hall and getting inspections locally, they have to take paperwork to a state agency in Santa Fe that is also providing inspectors. The change came thanks to a new state law requiring local governments to have a “certified building official” in order to do inspections. The town doesn’t have one, and now it’s hoping the county can help. The town has a deal in the works with Angel Fire (Angel Fire also has a state- recognized building official), but to the tune of \$81,000 a year. And that only gets them inspections two days a week. Angel Fire officials are still deciding whether or not the arrangement is good for them and have yet to approve the deal.

Town and county officials have said it makes more sense for municipalities in the area to use a building official from the county. That gets them right with the law, and they can then hire their own inspectors at a more reasonable price.

The rub, no surprise, is money.

For the county to take this on, it will likely want the town and any other municipality — like Questa or Red River — to chip in to pay for the building official. Expect those sorts of details to be hashed out Thursday.