

Twenty years on, town mulls options for beleaguered Chamisa Verde

By J.R. Logan

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Allegations of wrongdoing halted the development of the town-owned Chamisa Verde affordable housing subdivision in the late 2000s. But town officials now hope there's a chance to put some of the undeveloped property to work.

More than 20 years ago — in June 1995 — the town unveiled plans for a 32-acre, 130-unit affordable housing subdivision to give Taos' working class an option for homeownership. Bob Romero, the town's then-housing director, said in an interview at the time that Taos had the highest discrepancy between median income and housing costs in the state.

"We have to address this issue," Romero said.

But after some initial successes, the subdivision hit a major stumbling block.

In 2007, the state Mortgage Finance Authority (the agency in charge of making sure local governments handle affordable housing development according to state law) were made aware of a series of potential violations at the first phase of Chamisa Verde.

In June 2008, an attorney with the Mortgage Finance Authority sent an email to the town outlining the agency's concerns. Among them, the attorney noted the town could not produce several required documents pertaining to the sale of lots in the subdivision. The attorney also raised questions about whether lots that had been specifically designated for affordable housing had actually been sold to low-income buyers.

In light of those concerns, the agency halted work on phase one and went to the New Mexico Attorney General, asking him to sort out the allegations and determine if any laws were broken. In 2010, the town provided paperwork to the State Auditor's office, which was apparently conducting its own investigation.

However, those reviews yielded no clear results.

A spokesperson for the State Auditor told *The Taos News* the office could find no evidence of a special audit of Chamisa Verde. And a spokesman for Attorney General Hector Balderas (who happened to be State Auditor when the investigation was announced) said the investigation was closed by the previous administration with no charges being brought.

So what exactly does that mean for the dozens of undeveloped lots that remain unused in the 20-year-old development?

In an email to *The Taos News*, a spokesperson for the Mortgage Finance Authority maintained that it was still unable to "assist" with Phase 1 of Chamisa Verde until the town could show past transfers of lots were legal.

However, the agency said it does not have a problem with the town moving forward with other projects in different phases of the subdivision.

In an email to *The Taos News* this week, Town Manager Rick Bellis said the town is currently working on several affordable housing options, including finishing development of the seven empty lots in Chamisa Verde Phase I.

“There are a few hurdles we inherited from prior efforts by earlier administrations that we are working through with the state that should be wrapped up by mid-December to mid-January at the latest,” Bellis wrote. “But the state and we are agreed we should not hold up current and future housing efforts while we are doing the neglected housekeeping.”

Despite the challenges, the town has taken some action at Chamisa Verde recently.

In 2013, the town asked developers for proposals to plan, design, construct and manage the second phase of the subdivision, which consists of about 17.3 acres that remain undeveloped. A plat prepared by the town says as many as 180 units could be built in that area.

And in late 2014, the town transferred two lots to Habitat for Humanity so the nonprofit could build homes as well.

Bellis said the Habitat model — one lot at a time — has proven much more “doable” than doing larger scale projects.

He said while there are no restrictions on Phase 2, there are also no utilities, meaning it would be far more costly to develop.



The Chamisa Verde affordable housing subdivision (outlined in red) is located on the north side of Paseo del Ca-on East near the Taos Youth and Family Center. The project’s first phase (outlined in blue) is 10.2 acres and has been mired in questions about the legal transfer of properties for years. The 17.3-acre undeveloped portion, known as phase 2, still has the potential to provide space for low-income housing or subsidized rental properties.

Graphic by J.R. Logan/Satellite image courtesy Google Earth