

Town rezoning plan met with mixed feelings

By Cody Hooks

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Businesses and residents are offering mixed feelings on a proposal to rezone 22 acres in the area just south of downtown.

That proposal comes while Smith's Food and Drug contemplates an expansion. No specific site for such a plan has been identified, and no formal plans have yet been submitted to town officials.

But the town of Taos is hoping to rezone the area between Los Pandos Road and Quesnel Street. The switch to "general commercial" would open up the opportunity for stores with more square footage in an area that currently has what town manager Rick Bellis calls a "mishmash" of building sizes and uses.

Supporters of the rezoning says it could improve property values and help improve the look of an area that lacks real sidewalks, includes at least one vacant business, and touches one of the trickiest intersections in town.

A town employee said at a Jan. 6 meeting there's no question rezoning would lead to redevelopment of the area. Taos Mayor Dan Barrone confirmed to *The Taos News* Smith's has been in conversation with the town about a new store.

The next Planning and Zoning Commission meeting is scheduled Wednesday (Feb. 3) at the Taos Town Council Chambers on Civic Plaza Drive.

Regardless of whether the rezoning or Smith's expansion happen, businesses in the area are already relocating.

Enchanted Florist shares a building with SOMOS, the literary society that also sells used books. Both tenants have been looking to find a new space in a different location for more than a year.

Enchanted Florist is moving into an old pharmacy in a shopping center near Albertsons. SOMOS is still searching for a new venue. John Slenes, one of four owners of the Indian Hills Inn, wrote to *The Taos News* Tuesday (Jan. 26), saying he was behind the rezoning proposal because it gave business owners more options. "I am 100 percent supportive" of the proposed zoning change, Slenes wrote. "Such a change will allow us, with over an acre of underused land, more possibilities in developing that acre and for potential tenants in our retail rental building."

Such a zoning change, he said, might also better the chances of selling the property. Like many hotels in Taos, Indian Hills Inn has been for sale for several years. “The average local citizen would be benefited by a new or expanding large retailer,” Slenes said, by not having to drive so far to buy certain things. “The Taos economy needs all the boost it can find, attract and have,” he said.

But the potential to rezone those 22 acres raises questions about what types, and sizes, of businesses would be able to start up, move or expand in an area redeveloped with a larger retailer in mind. Furthermore, what would rezoning and a rapid redevelopment mean for affordability?

Jethro’s Genuine Texas Barbecue, a mobile food operation, was leasing a patch of green space and dirt parking lot adjacent to McDonald’s, but has moved in recent weeks to a parking lot shared with Nusenda Credit Union farther south.

Part owner and “assistant pit master” Shera Maher told

The Taos News, “When we started this business, we only had \$10, a borrowed hot dog cart and a tent. We put every penny back into that business.”

“I don’t have \$50,000 to get into one of these storefronts,” she said.

At the same time, Taos Mesa Brewing (TMB) is opening a new taproom in the former J.D. Challenger building at the corner of Quesnel and Paseo — extending the footprint of nightlife and downtown amenities.

Dan Irion, a TMB owner, told *The Taos News* rezoning — which for their location would add a historic overlay — wouldn’t affect the new taproom, as the business has already received a permit to remodel the building for two ADA-compliant bathrooms and plumbing for the bar. Town approval of a liquor license is the final major permitting hurdle before a spring opening.

But some worry about the impact the rezoning would have on the neighborhoods behind it. Cindy Norris, a resident of the area, raised concerns about the light pollution from more 24/7 lighting in a bigger parking lot, as well as the usual noise of a large retail store running deep into the night.

“I’m not opposed to development. But let’s at least ask the questions. Rezoning changes that neighborhood,” she said.

During the Jan. 6 Planning and Zoning Commission meeting, Taos resident (and *Taos News* columnist) David Fernández said, “Like anything else in Taos, we urge clear, focused and cautious approaches to these things.”