

Town to host forum on controversial rezoning

By J.R. Logan

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The town of Taos will hold an “informational forum” on a rezoning proposal Thursday (March 3), 6 to 8 p.m., at the Town Council Chambers located at 120 Civic Plaza Drive.

The forum is meant to offer information and answer questions about the proposed rezoning of around 20 acres fronting or adjacent to Paseo del Pueblo Sur, within an area bordered on the south by Siler and Los Pandos, the north by Quesnel and on the east by Montoya.

The rezoning would make it easier for commercial development to occur in the area.

A press release from the town says the forum will include a staff presentation regarding the proposed rezoning, including the causes and objectives of the rezoning, followed by a question-and-answer session.

Town officials have said the proposed rezoning is meant to encourage development in the area immediately south of the historic district.

To be approved, the Taos Planning and Zoning Commission must recommend that the town council adopt the new zoning. The town council must then vote to approve the change.

The plan was first presented to the planning commission in early January.

At the time, Town Manager Rick Bellis said the goal was to allow for “opportunity” and said the town had been approached with proposals, but had no specific developer in mind.

However, town emails obtained through a public records request show Bellis and other town officials had been meeting with an Albuquerque developer for nearly 18 months on a plan to relocate the Smith’s grocery store to the area slated for rezoning. In fact, Bellis had arranged a meeting with the developer to discuss zoning the day after the first planning meeting.

Town officials have since acknowledged Smith’s plans to move, though they maintain that the rezoning plan is not specifically to accommodate the development.

Supporters of the plan have argued it would allow for “infill development” that makes use of vacant land in areas that have already been developed. They also say it would help spruce up the look of Taos’ main drag leading into downtown.

Opponents argue allowing large commercial business in the area would alter the character of the neighborhood. There are also concerns that the building site would partially cover vacant land that has been identified as having historic value and was, at some time, irrigated by an acequia.

Further, town emails also show Floyd Lopez, town attorney, has a familial connection to the co-owners of a property slated for rezoning that is key to the relocation of Smith's. Lopez has yet to make a public statement regarding the potential conflict of interest.

The planning commission voted to recommend an amended zoning plan at its Feb. 3 meeting. The town council is expected to revisit the issue at a special meeting March 17.

A Planning and Zoning Commission meeting Wednesday evening (March 2) that was to include discussion on the issue took place after press time.

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