

My Turn

On the role of the Taos Land Trust

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For 28 years the Taos Land Trust (TLT) has worked with private landowners and government agencies to protect iconic landscapes such as the Taos Valley Overlook, Ute Mountain and the pastures north of the Overland Sheepskin Company. Our process for most projects begins with a local landowner, who possesses a personal passion for the natural characteristics present on their land and a vision for conservation that also benefits the community as a whole. Retaining the pastoral beauty of the Taos Valley always informs our efforts. To that end, we have worked with landowners using tax tools that provide incentives for agricultural and ranchlands to remain vital and productive. The conservation of private, working, lands and landscapes offers public benefits by protecting, among other things, watersheds and ensuring local food security.

In our past successes — including the purchase and transfer of the Ponce de Leon Hot Springs to Taos Pueblo, and the more recent acquisition of a 20-acre parcel adjacent to Fred Baca Park replete with wetlands and critical riparian habitat — our role has been to educate, facilitate and foster partnerships. We are currently actively engaged in a community mapping and planning process with the Trust for Public Land. This process will result in a set of land and trails priorities, identified by the community, that will contribute to TLT's strategic direction. Our hope is that this process will also inform other entities — including the town of Taos and Taos County — about community needs and desires. We'd like to thank every member of the community who has contributed to the process so far.

Once priorities are identified — whether acequia restoration, saving ranch and agricultural land, creating accessible trails, or preserving wildlife corridors — the next steps will be to identify methods, partners and sources of funding necessary to address those priorities. This is a multiyear process that currently occupies most of our attention and budget.

Many Taos-ers have requested that the Taos Land Trust take a stand against the town's proposed re-zoning. While we appreciate the influence you attribute to our organization, calls for the Land Trust to lead the charge against rezoning highlight the misconceptions about what your local land trust does, and how we engage with our community. Our primary work is to assist private landowners in placing conservation easements on their land. But we also work with public entities to share our expertise in land conservation. For example, in 2006, the town of Taos engaged TLT to research the conservation values of certain parcels, and potential funding mechanisms or qualifying federal or state programs that might help preserve these lands. The Couse pasture was one of the identified parcels.

As your local Land Trust, we maintain the legislative contacts and technical expertise to help make conservation projects a reality. We are happy to meet with anyone in the community to

discuss potential conservation projects, using the tools we can bring to the table, including conservation easements.

We encourage continued community participation, not only in our own planning process with the Trust for Public Land, but in community forums and town meetings. As always, we advocate for a transparent public process that is considerate, non-combative and focused on consensus. Please continue to express your concerns about the Couse pastures, and please come to our public meetings planned for mid-April. For more information, visit taoslandtrust.org.

Christopher M. Smith chairs the Taos Land Trust's board of directors. Kristina Ortez de Jones is the executive director.

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