

My Turn

Good news: The Taos economy is growing

Bill Christmas

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Despite what town of Taos officials say, since 2013 the Taos economy is improving at a rate that no one anticipated after the recession of 2008. Tourism is one of the main drivers of economic growth and can be measured by percentage increases of the Lodgers Tax:

- 11.3 percent in 2014
- 2.6 percent in 2015
- 6.3 percent in the first four months of fiscal 2016
- From 2013 – 2015, the five winter months were up 11.7 percent.
- From 2013 – fiscal 2016, the four summer months were up 23.3 percent.

While there is a lot of well-deserved excitement about the ski areas, our busiest tourist season is summer. Taos is known for its art, and tourists come from around the world to visit our numerous galleries and excellent museums to see work by contemporary painters, sculptors, potters, and weavers, traditional Pueblo and Hispanic artists, and the famous 100-year-old Taos Society of Artists. Other draws are our long and unusual history, our tri-cultural population, and Taos Pueblo. The 526,000-acre Carson National Forest is an adventure destination where everyone enjoys both natural beauty and a variety of outdoor activities.

Four recent major developments are having a significant positive impact on the Taos economy:

March 2013: The federal government designated the 242,455-acre Rio Grande del Norte National Monument, which is already attracting an increasing number of visitors to enjoy natural beauty, river rafting, mountain biking, hiking, fishing, camping and archaeology. A 500-mile hiking trail planned through the park is expected to compete with the Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail. In December 2015, Congress appropriated \$2.9 million to purchase additional property for the monument and \$5 million more for newly designated monuments including ours.

December 2013: The Taos Ski Valley was sold to billionaire Louis Bacon. He immediately began a 10-year, \$350 million expansion. The winter of 2014-15 saw the opening of a lift to Kachina Peak that has attracted national attention in the ski industry and brought serious skiers here from all over the country. Construction of a major new hotel and remodel of the base area are underway along with more trail development.

APRIL 2014: A \$24 million expansion of the Taos airport began. The new longer runway will accommodate larger private and commuter jets and will make the Town of Taos, the Taos Ski Valley, and the surrounding areas more accessible to tourists.

In 2014: The University of New Mexico, Taos Branch, purchased and began renovation of the underutilized downtown Convention Center. UNM-Taos has been expanding rapidly and this will be their second campus. This \$4.6-5 million project will accommodate an expansion of UNM's Workforce Development Programs particularly in medicine and technology but also in forestry and other fields. Education is a growth industry well suited to Taos' strengths.

Taos County unemployment rates have already been affected by these developments.

In an article dated April 21, 2015, the Department of Workforce Solutions reports, "This is New Mexico's thirty- first consecutive month of over-the-year employment growth. Employment growth has trended upward since October 2013, mainly due to gains in key private-service providing industries ... This month, leisure and hospitality gained 3,200 jobs, representing an increase of 3.6 percent. This is the industry's largest post-recessionary gain, apart from a slightly higher gain in May, 2014."

An article in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* dated April 22, 2015 says: "In Taos County, Tuesday's data indicated unemployment continues to decline. The unemployment rate in Taos County dropped from 9.3 percent in March 2014 to 8.4 percent in March 2015." Also, "Employment growth has trended upward since October 2013, mainly due to gains in key private-services producing industries. ... Overall, healthcare and education continue to contribute 1 in 3 new jobs to New Mexico. ... Other big gainers were professional and business services ... leisure and hospitality."

One other piece of good news is that the Questa airport is in the process of receiving \$323,000 in federal funds for improvements.

The Taos economy is growing and has a big upside potential.

Bill Christmas is a retired physician who has lived in Taos since 2004.

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