

## Town offers more details on rezoning at forum

By J.R. Logan

*The Taos News*, 3/10/2016

A standing-room-only crowd filled the Taos Town Council Chambers Thursday (March 3) for what was, at times, a rowdy public forum on a plan to rezone an area just south of the historic district.

The town hoped to use the forum to offer information and answer questions about the proposed rezoning of around 20 acres along Paseo del Pueblo Sur, between Los Pinos and Quesnel.

The town council has scheduled a public work session March 15 at 9 a.m., which may include a visit to the rezoning property.

A meeting to vote on whether to approve the rezoning is scheduled for March 17.

In their presentation, town officials reiterated the rezoning would allow for redevelopment of some outdated properties on the east side of Paseo and provide a face-lift for the "gateway" to downtown.

Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis said the existing zoning severely limits improvements that can be made. And he said multiple developers have floated proposals for commercial developments, only to walk away because the existing zoning restrictions are too prohibitive.

"We meet every day with people that want to develop in this community, and those people leave because they say, 'Holy crap, I'm not going through that,'" Bellis said.

Bellis reiterated that the town had no single developer in mind in proposing the rezoning.

Smith's Food and Drug has indicated it is interested in relocating and expanding. In a December email to his staff, the town's planning director only identified Smith's as a potential developer in the area.

At one point during the forum, Bellis made an off-hand remark that "representations had been made to the town" that a property in the rezoning area — the southern Couse Pasture — was under contract.

When pressed by the suddenly raucous crowd on who made that representation, Bellis declined to answer.

John Mahoney, a developer representing Smith's who has met with the town on the project, did not respond to an email seeking comment on any contract. Rudolph Sacks, who represents the owners of the property, did not respond to an email asking about a contract.

Bellis said there was some urgency spurring the rezoning because the state has promised \$13.5 million to make improvements to most of the main drag through town, including the corridor of Paseo that runs through the rezoning area.

If a developer does come forward with a project that coincides with the highway redevelopment, it could mean private money could soften the cost of that work — especially right-of-way expenses — and provide more amenities, like better sidewalks and bike lanes, Bellis said.

“We have a unique window that’s actually going to make development attractive without costing the taxpayer,” Bellis said.

Bellis said bringing that kind of project to the center of town would ensure the historic district remains a center of activity, rather than pushing new businesses farther from the heart of town.

Bellis asked those in attendance to imagine a tasteful commercial center, a traffic circle at the intersection of Paseo/Los Pandos/Siler complete with a fountain or statue in the center, preserved green space adjacent to Quesnel and even a walking trail along the Spring Ditch acequia corridor.

The description clearly quelled some of the rancor with which the meeting began, but others weren’t convinced.

“You’re going to lose control of this as soon as you rezone it, and you know it,” countered resident Ann Kaufman. “You have this stupid story about how we’re going to have Shangri-La in the Couse Pasture.”

Kaufman then warned those in attendance to take Bellis’ pitch with a grain of salt. “Drink the Kool-Aid, and you’re going to drink it at your peril.”

Bellis did acknowledge that the town would not have complete control over the types of developments that could be made in the rezoning area if the changes are approved.

One speaker pointed out that making the zoning less restrictive could open the door to any kind of development, not just the ideal projects the town had in mind, like a modern hotel, convention center or upscale shopping center.

“Even if we do all this, there’s no guarantee that this is all going to work,” Bellis said.