

## Calls made for proactive land use planning

**By J.R. Logan**

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From the ashes of a failed rezoning proposal, Taos Town Councilor Fritz Hahn says he wants to start a conversation to promote proactive (instead of reactive) community involvement on land use issues.

“To think that because we’ve dealt with the rezoning means that we’ve dealt with health and safety issues, I think, is a mistake,” Hahn told

*The Taos News* Tuesday (April 19). “And I’m challenging the council to keep this discussion going.” Hahn says Taos Town Council needs to talk through some of the problems that arose during the rezoning debate. But so far, neither his fellow councilors nor community members have shown much appetite for that conversation, though there seems to be agreement the town needs to update its overall development master plan.

Last month, the town council denied a controversial proposal to rezone an area just south of the historic district to accommodate larger commercial development. At the center of the debate was the Couse Pasture – 20 acres of open space that sits between businesses on Paseo del Pueblo and residences on Montoya Street.

Supporters of the rezoning said redeveloping properties along the road and parts of the Couse property would reduce crime and improve the appearance of the “gateway” leading to the town’s downtown area. Opponents said the pasture was valuable open space with cultural and ecological resources worth protecting, and development would have severe impacts on residents of the neighborhood.

The town’s planning department acknowledged that both sides could find evidence to support their argument in the town’s master planning documents. The plans emphasize the importance of infill development (that is, building on plots of vacant land in otherwise built-up parts of town), as well as the need to hang on to open space for quality of life and environmental purposes.

The rezoning was complicated by revelations that despite statements the rezoning was not meant to accommodate a specific developer or project, town leadership had been meeting with a developer representing Smith’s Food and Drug for months. The developer had come forward with multiple plans for a project in the rezoning area and had met with the town manager to discuss rezoning.

In the end, Taos Town Council killed the idea, with several councilors saying the process had been flawed from the beginning. Hahn said Tuesday he agreed that the proposal, as presented, was problematic. But he hoped it could serve as a learning opportunity.

“What did we do right? What did we do wrong? How can we do it better?” Hahn asked. “I think everyone would agree, whether you’re pro or con on this issue, it was judgment before investigation.”

Hahn explained the council's decision was based almost entirely on comments from the public, with little input from experts who could describe the effects development might have on property values, alleged crime in the Couse Pasture, water resources and the economy.

In the weeks since the rezoning failed, Hahn has repeatedly asked the council to schedule work-study sessions and invite experts to offer their opinions on how to address safety and welfare concerns in that area. Part of the goal, Hahn said, is to get the community engaged in a proactive way, rather than waiting to react when any project in any part of town is proposed.

Hahn said he's not surprised at the reluctance to keep talking about what to do in that rezoning area, given the vitriol it inspired. "They've touched the stove, and it's hot," Hahn said of his fellow councilors.

But Hahn's insistence that the conversation should continue has some nearby residents worried the town wants to find another way to push through a big-box project. Hahn's use of the term "blighted," for instance, has been interpreted as a means to give the town the authority to take control of the area and force some kind of redevelopment.

In public meetings on the rezoning, town officials have said they had no intention of taking such an approach, noting it would be incredibly difficult and very unpopular.

Hahn said suggestions that he was trying to use these work-study sessions as a "ruse" to get development done was "terribly offensive."

Beth Robinson, a resident of Montoya Street who opposed the rezoning, said she's part of a group that's already showing the kind of initiative Hahn wants to inspire. Robinson said the group has reached out to conservation organizations and to the owners of the Couse Pasture to find out if there's any chance of buying the property to protect it from development. She said the group gained momentum in its opposition to the rezoning, and its members are hoping to keep that momentum going.

Robinson said part of the neighborhood's reluctance to engage in new conversations with the town comes from a lack of trust. She said the rezoning lacked transparency, and many residents are still wary of the town's intentions.

She also wondered why Hahn was insistent on focusing on her neighborhood. Many parts of town need help, she said. Why keep bothering people on Montoya Street?

Town Councilor Darien Fernandez, also a resident of Montoya Street, agrees. "I think it's too shortsighted and too targeted in one neighborhood," Fernandez told *The Taos News* Wednesday (April 20), noting that some people are still worked up about the rezoning and might not be open to a discussion about issues in that area. "We have abandoned storefronts all along Paseo. If we're really concerned about health, safety and welfare, let's not limit it to one neighborhood. I think we need to start with a whole new planning process and look at land use through the whole town."

On that point, he and Hahn feel similarly. The town's existing master plan is 17 years old. Parts have been updated, but the town planning department says those revisions have not been formally adopted.

By its very name, the "Vision 2020" plan will be obsolete in just a few years. If the town hopes to allow development while protecting what it values, there's general agreement that a more modern plan for the future will be a valuable tool.