



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## Inspections detail fire, building code violations at Taos hotels

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*The Taos News*, 6/2/2016

Many Taos hotels are outdated and lack basic maintenance. That's the takeaway by town leaders following a thorough inspection of every hotel in Taos conducted over several months last year.

Town leaders say the inspections showed a large part of Taos' lodging facilities are aging and in need of significant reinvestment in order to cater to modern tourists. But some hotel owners counter that despite a few problem properties, Taos' lodging establishments are generally in good condition and are far from a drag on the tourism industry.

Town records obtained through a public records request show every existing hotel failed to pass a first inspection by the town fire marshal. The inspection reports detail dozens of violations in most hotels, ranging from relatively minor infractions, like improper use of electrical outlets, to more serious issues, like inoperable fire alarms.

In about half the hotels, owners or management addressed the issues and were cleared of any violations on subsequent inspections.

But in eight cases, there is no paperwork to show that all violations have yet been cleared up.

In an interview June 1, Town Manager Rick Bellis said the inspection reports were "pretty disappointing and in some cases shocking," but he insisted that any serious public safety issues at all hotels had been resolved.

Bellis said constant complaints from visitors about the condition of Taos hotels prompted the inspections, which covered 16 hotels between March and September 2015, records show.

"We heard everything from 'the service sucks' to 'the sheets are dirty' to 'the toilets don't work,'" Bellis said.

According to Bellis, the sorry state of much of the town's hotel stock means visitors might come to town for a day trip, but many end up spending the night somewhere else, especially since the rates at some of the older hotels were as high as more modern ones to the south. "We heard people say they can stay at Buffalo Thunder with a pool and a casino for the same price," Bellis said.

But Chris Smith, general manager at the Historic Taos Inn, says it's unfair to overgeneralize and suggest there aren't good places to stay in Taos.

"It's not a fair statement at all," Smith said. "Taos is one of the largest draws in the state, and our lodging is not in and of itself keeping people away."

Smith noted there are some properties in bad need of repair, and some have absentee owners. But he also said some hotels continue to struggle in the wake of the great recession and are trying to find ways to tackle deferred maintenance.

Smith made clear the town inspectors were very professional when visiting the Taos Inn property, and he was glad attention was being paid to safety.

The town government has very limited control over issues related to customer service and cleanliness. But it did have the authority to conduct inspections by the fire marshal and building code enforcement officer.

The findings, Bellis said, showed there were many hotel owners who were not reinvesting or maintaining their facilities. In a few cases, Bellis said rooms that were in such bad shape that they couldn't go to guests were instead rented to "transients" — by the week or even month.

He added that the town tried to give hotel owners reasonable leeway in complying with the codes. Documents show some hotels made very little effort to comply with inspection demands. In one case — at the Whitten Inn — inspectors visited the property five times before the hotel was cleared, according to records.

In what was clearly the harshest of the inspection reports, the town's building inspector said the second story portal and walkway on the south building of the Indian Hills Inn was "a physical disaster waiting to happen, endangering both guests and employees." According to the report, the hotel's manager said the owner was trying to sell the property and "didn't want to invest anything into it."

"It is obvious that with little to no maintenance being done, and from the outward appearance of the structure, few people would submit to being guests there," the inspector wrote, likening the worsening condition to another hotel that was condemned and demolished a few years ago.

John Slenes, owner of the Indian Hills Inn, declined to comment for this story.

Of the hotels that did not comply with the fire marshal's orders, Bellis said the town was not overly aggressive in closing them. He said Taos has lost hundreds of hotel rooms after a series of closures and that there was a worry that drastic action would make it even harder to stay here.

When asked if there are hotels visitors should avoid for safety reasons, Bellis said the town was not aware of any immediate safety concerns. He said parts of hotels where there were safety issues have been closed to the public. He also recommend visitors check online hotel rating sites for better information on the condition of specific facilities.

The town has the authority to enforce fire code violations, but building code violations must be referred to the state Construction Industries Division for enforcement.

Bellis said the town planned to adopt more stringent codes regarding commercial landscaping and general appearance to give local officials more teeth. He added that the town also plans to push the state to enforce code violations on two hotels, though he declined to name which ones.

A spokesman for the Construction Industries Division did not respond to questions about whether the agency has received notice from town officials on potential building code violations or whether it's taken any action on such tips.

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