

Town extends historic zone to create 'buffer'

By J.R. Logan

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Developers looking to build in the area immediately south of Taos Plaza will now have to meet design codes meant to make structures look more historic.

Late last month, the town council voted to expand the so-called "historic overlay zone" (HOZ) to include 16 properties that mostly front Paseo del Pueblo from Quesnel Street south to Los Pandos Road. The new zone also covers the Couse Pasture, which was one of the primary subjects of a rezoning debate earlier this year.

Extending the historic overlay came after appointed officials offered differing opinions on whether the additional rules would deter development in a stretch of Paseo that town planners have called "arguably blighted."

According to the town code, the HOZ is meant to "protect, preserve, and perpetuate areas of historical, cultural, architectural, artistic or geographical significance."

Louis Fineberg, town planning director, has said the code could be used to ensure a "buffer" of attractive architecture in the area leading into downtown.

Members of the town's historic preservation commission (HPC) recommended the town council adopt the changes, arguing they were necessary to have better control over development near the downtown core.

Development in the HOZ must conform to three specific architectural styles: pueblo/ Spanish revival, pitched-roof territorial or "bungalow/craftsman."

Anyone wishing to demolish or build a new structure must first get approval from the HPC.

While that volunteer board unanimously approved the changes, the Taos Planning and Zoning Commission voted 3-1 against the proposal at a meeting July 19.

"This is just another way of [the HPC] trying to restrict development that I believe is needed in this community," said commission member Dennis Garcia. Fellow commission member Doug Patterson agreed, arguing the changes could have "unintended consequences that make redevelopment more difficult."

But Jim Pollard, the lone vote in favor of the changes, argued the town needed more teeth to ensure development was in line with the historic flavor of the Plaza area. "This is the gateway to our town," Pollard said.

A week later, the town council ignored the planning commission's recommendation and approved the changes.

"This is a no-brainer," said Town Manager Rick Bellis.

Earlier this year, Bellis advocated for a different zone change in the same area that would allow large commercial development to move forward. The owners of Smith's Food and Drug had expressed interest in relocating to the east side of Paseo, and the zone change could have made approval of that project simpler.

At the time, Bellis and other town officials said the area desperately needed to be redeveloped. They also said they wanted more control over how that development would look.

At the July 26 meeting, Bellis acknowledged that the HOZ had more stringent requirements. But he said the zone already extended northward beyond the historic district core and had resulted in more attractive buildings in the area between the north Allsup's and the Plaza.

Bellis said similar rules were necessary south of downtown, even if they scared some investors away.

"We don't need growth at the point that we abandon all community standards and design and place the downtown in jeopardy," Bellis said.



The historic overlay zone (in yellow) was recently extended to include areas south of Taos Plaza (in red). The zone has more stringent building design codes meant to preserve Taos' historic character.

Graphic by J.R. Logan (map courtesy Google Earth and town of Taos)

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