

My Turn

Taos' physical character 'threatened' by rezoning proposal to allow for taller buildings

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Taosenos, do you want 50-foot tall hotels? Do you want 175 acres of them?

That is the current hot-button issue coming before the Town Council on Aug. 29 at 3 p.m. in their chambers on Civic Plaza Drive.

The 22-acre Smith's rezoning proposal, denied by the council in March, was mere child's play compared to this ambitious plan to rezone 175 acres allowing 50-foot tall hotels on Canon East and Pueblo Sur.

There are three sections in all. One, on Canon East, runs 4,500 feet along that road, beginning at the second traffic circle east of Pueblo Sur and continuing east for almost a mile. The property is roughly 39 acres.

The other two sections are on opposite sides of Pueblo Sur. The two together total approximately 136 acres. On the east side, the Verizon store is the northern boundary and Medina Road, just north of La Cocina restaurant, is the southern boundary. On the west side, Peoples Bank is roughly the northern boundary, and not far below the Sagebrush Inn is the southern boundary. Both sections extend quite far off the highway.

So far, this proposal has flown far under the radar. The development review committee is no longer open to the public. If someone is not on the email list for town meeting notifications, does not read the legal notices in *The Taos News* and does not check the town's website for meeting agendas, word-of-mouth has been the only way to find out what is happening in town.

This proposal sailed through planning and zoning on Aug. 3 with a 7-0 vote in favor, with no pushback from any members of the commission. Only three citizens spoke to the issue for their allotted five minutes – two for, one against. The town manager spoke for 20 minutes urging the commission to pass the proposal.

Zoning these two areas for motels (not hotels) is a good idea. But 50-foot tall buildings is totally out of scale for Taos.

The town manager himself has been quoted as saying, "We don't need growth at the point that we abandon all community standards and design..." If more height is allowed now, it sets a precedent which will be impossible to stop.

Already, a property owner across from the Canon East parcel has requested a planning and zoning hearing next month asking to be included in the rezoning proposal. If the height limit in the town is extended to 50 feet, then surely the county will not be far behind.

Once again, pandering to corporate America (in this case, national hotel chains) threatens our town's physical character. We have spent the last several years trying to convince the administration that we don't want to look like Santa Fe, Espa-ola or other communities whose sense of scale has been breached. Once gone, forever gone.

If properly managed, we could be the only historic town in the country that has been able to keep its community feeling and scale while still allowing a unique experience for our visitors.

Preserving our heritage should be uppermost in our thoughts. This is what sets us apart from other tourist destinations.

An issue of this importance deserves close scrutiny by the citizens.

Baker is a resident of El Prado.

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