

Town punts vote on taller hotels

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The Taos Town Council has delayed a decision on a proposal that would allow 50-foot-tall hotels at the south end of town.

The decision came at a meeting Aug. 29 after nearly five hours of debate over whether taller structures would improve the region's tourism economy – or be a blight on Taos' small-town charm and scenery.

The town is proposing the creation of a "hotel overlay zone" in the area along Paseo del Pueblo Sur, going south from about Este Es Road to the town's southern boundary. The overlay would allow 50-foot-tall hotels that meet specific architectural design standards. The current height limit is 27 feet.

The town withdrew a part of the proposal that would have allowed 50-foot-tall hotels on the south side of Paseo del Ca-on, across from the Youth and Family Center.

At the meeting, town manager Rick Bellis reiterated his case that much of Taos' lodging establishments are outdated and inadequate. The current administration has made a concerted effort to create and promote more events, and Bellis argued there aren't enough hotel rooms to accommodate visitors during events.

Bellis cited a recent study commissioned by the town to gauge the economic impact of the recent Alabama Shakes concert. Bellis said the show generated \$1.8 million in revenue, but the town was only able to accommodate one-quarter of the ticket holders overnight.

"If we had more rooms, we could accommodate more people and obviously make more money," said Karina Armijo, the town's marketing director.

Armijo also noted that the growing popularity of short-term vacation rentals in private homes has had a devastating impact on the local rental market. Property owners can make more money using residences as vacation rentals, meaning that it's harder for residents to find a place to live.

The town's fire marshal also said some existing hotels are in disrepair, as evidenced in a comprehensive inspection of every hotel within town limits a few months ago.

Supporters said the change would entice investment from developers to build modern lodging establishments and spur economic development.

Members of the public, most of whom were opposed to the proposal, spent hours commenting on the merits of allowing taller hotels.

Former town councilor Andrew Gonzales, now an employee of Kit Carson Electric Cooperative, said at the meeting the overlay would result in economic development that would make it easier for families like his to stay in Taos.

"We cannot close the door on growth," Gonzales said.

But opponents questioned logic of whether attracting hotel chains, which relatively low wages, really benefit the community.

"What we have here is one vision of what's good for said William Burden, to manager Bellis' vision for more events and hotel Critics also argued the scale a four-story hotel wasn't appropriate in Taos.

"This project needs some more thought process," said the corporate offer would man's Taos," referring rooms. of Paul Aragon, who described himself as a developer of "historic, proportional" hotels. He called a proposed Holiday Inn that was rejected by the planning commission a "prototypical" corporate hotel.

Town councilors were divided on whether they had enough information and public input to make a decision.

Councilor Darien Fernandez argued the council should take several weeks to confer with members of the town's planning commission and historic preservation committee for advice on design standards. Fernandez also said the additional time would give the public more time to weigh in.

But councilor Fritz Hahn countered that the planning commission had unanimously recommended the overlay be passed. He suggested a delayed vote had more to do with an unwillingness to take a vote that might be unpopular.

"I get the feeling that we just want to kick the can down the road because we don't want to make the decision," Hahn said.

The council ultimately voted to postpone a final decision until a meeting Oct. 11. They also scheduled a work session on the issue for Oct. 4 at 3 p.m. in the town council chambers on Civic Plaza Drive.



Members of the public filled the town council chambers Aug. 29 to comment on a proposed hotel overlay zone that would allow taller hotels to be built at the south end of Taos.

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