

My Turn

Not against intelligent growth for Taos, but higher heights for hotels not the answer

Robin Reese

The Taos News, 9/1/2016

I respect the work of the Town Council and very much realize Taos needs revenue. I support intelligent growth. I even liked the airport expansion. But doubling the height limit is a mistake, a last ditch approach. Short-term monetary gains almost always lead to long-term erosion of a town's unique character. This has been shown time and time again across the country. We can do better. Taos is decidedly not typical small-town America, so let's be creative.

- 1.) It has been reported that motels "must be" at least four stories in order to build. This is incorrect. The reason so-called big box motels "need" to be four to five stories tall is, generally, because the majority of them are franchises set in high-traffic, urban areas where land is a lot more expensive and open spaces are rare. The economics on cheaper land are different. Big boxes can be designed-to-scale to our community. Taos hasn't tried hard enough to work with negotiating these conditions with motels. It is done all the time. Motels know that the upfront cost of design/construction is a very small percentage of the true long-term cost of the thing. They will deal. Hold firm.
- 2.) A rule of thumb in good planning is that, within a certain radius, no building should be taller than the leading landmark. Check out many state capitals around the country and you will see that this is an intelligent, time-honored tradition in building codes.
- 3.) If you do want to double the current height limit, stipulations must be made as a direct part of the ordinance, that include large set-backs from the street as well as a "stepped" approach — one that gradually increases a building's height away from the street. The Pueblo is a perfect model for these last two points. Where are these concepts included in this ordinance?
- 4.) The current condition of existing motel rooms must be addressed before adding even more possible failures down the road. If we can't enforce health codes from the start, new motels will simply repeat these problems down the line. In just a matter of years we could be faced with even more health code violations. How do we guarantee this time will be different? When these violations are allowed to build up, motel owners cannot pay and motels fall into disrepair. They become impossible to rent or even to sell. This is the situation at present with some 40 percent of the rooms here. Another rule of thumb? A healthy motel is one that is turned-over every seven years or so. This allows new owners, by refurbishing, to start the depreciation cycle all over again. Helpful tax laws now ensure that money can begin to be made again once the place is refurbished. A win/win: clean motel rooms and happy owners. We have not studied or educated or helped facilitate the specifics of this intelligent practice in Taos. Can that change?
- 5.) One of the oldest towns in the country, Taos is different. Boiler-plate solutions will not work here. If we do truly wish to raise building heights, let's consider ideas like short-term tax

credits to lure business that will build and create real employment. Do we really need more motel jobs for domestics? We now have fiber optics. Telecom firms can locate anywhere. Why not move here? Where is the evidence that Taos has even tried to recruit firms that create real jobs. A lot of folks look hopefully toward short-term construction but we need real honest to goodness long-term promotable jobs — especially for young people. We need to keep kids engaged and less inclined to use drugs. Why is our thinking always driven by the wants and needs of tourists?

6.) Finally, this idea of “attracting tourists” is meaningless if we can’t create a viable downtown. How can we trust our elected members’ new idea when we can’t even get cars out of the plaza? Tourists come to see a real something, not ticky-tacky objects in shops. Where is the “there” there? Do tourists really want another Disney version of a southwestern town?

Reese is a 10-year resident of Taos. She grew up surrounded by architects and city planners.