

## My Turn

### **Discussion of change cannot simply raise a knee-jerk reaction by the few**

David and Larry Mapes

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The town of Taos has a centuries-old history, one which weaves over 400 years of Native and Spanish culture into a rich tapestry that has also assimilated the late arrival of the Anglo population. Incorporated as a general law municipality on May 7, 1934, the town now boasts a lively diversity in its citizenry and its traditions, which must be both honored and protected. The elected mayor and council members, assisted by an appointed town manager, are responsible for the governance of the town and are mandated to ensure both the efficient transmission of goods and services due the residents of the municipality, and the sharing of resources that are necessary to a healthy and happy community. Courts and public safety agencies, infrastructure protection, utilities and recreation services, are among these quality-of-life assets that fall within the realm of town responsibility. Perhaps no other municipal function has received more attention recently than that provided by the department of planning and economic development. As Taos, like so many other communities throughout the U.S., struggles to recover from an economic decline, it has become clear that planning and economic development must focus on smart growth initiatives supporting the tourism industry that is the backbone of the town's revenue, while developing strategies for an expanded business foundation that will create new jobs and opportunities for its citizens.

Whatever one's opinion concerning the recent controversy surrounding the proposal by Kroger Co. to build a new Smith's Food & Drug, it did bring to the forefront the many conflicting issues that confront town officials. Preservation of the town's quaintness in general, and of the historic district in particular, will always be a factor in the decisions made with regard to the future of Taos — and rightly so. However, the conversation cannot stop there as Smith's did.

Despite the robust outdoor adventure component of the county's overall health, the town itself will flounder if new businesses and industries face insurmountable challenges in trying to establish themselves here. Taos stands at the crossroads of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado, a prime location for thoughtful and sustainable growth benefiting not only town residents, but those of Taos County and its neighbors. Clean industries, such as those in information technology, research and development and light manufacturing will provide a true living-wage job market and broader tax base which will cause positive ripple effects to manifest throughout the region: greater emphasis on quality education benefiting public schools and the University of New Mexico, incentives for young people to remain and pursue professional careers in their hometowns and support for higher-quality healthcare.

Rejecting change for change's sake is naive. Shall we take away our internet, our cell phones and disconnect from the outside? Shall we pretend to our children and grandchildren that there isn't a wider world of opportunity and options than exist here in Taos? Shall we sit back

and watch the out-migration of our youth leaving Taos a dying, dusty relic of bygone times? No, we cannot.

This is not a call to exchange the authenticity of Taos for the glitter of places such as Telluride or Aspen, nor is it a call for expansion to the size of Santa Fe – as a small but vocal portion of the population would have us all believe. Indeed, there are many more voices that should be recruited to be part of the conversation and thus ensure our entire population has been represented in the long-term planning for Taos.

Tourism will always be one of the top “products” offered by Taos, but it is something that has to work for everyone.

Many of those in the hospitality industry are working three jobs — often without benefits — to make ends meet. Is this the best we should offer our citizens? Or do we welcome more corporate presence, ones who will respect all that makes Taos special and yet provide lifetime jobs on which one can comfortably raise a family and plan for retirement?

The discussion of change cannot simply raise a knee-jerk reaction by the few. The discussion is for all residents who recognize how the creation of new jobs and opportunities in Taos is its best chance for preservation of our shared culture.

*David and Larry Mapes are brothers and owners of Taos businesses. David Mapes owns David Anthony Fine Art and New Mexico Furniture Co., while Larry Mapes owns Valverde Energy and Bond Plumbing.*