

Council votes 3-2 to increase hotel height limit

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In a split vote, the town council decided Oct. 11 to allow 48-foot hotels along Paseo del Pueblo at the southernmost end of Taos.

Councilors Nathaniel Evans and Fritz Hahn voted to approve the change. Councilors Judi Cantu and Darien Fernandez were opposed. Mayor Dan Barrone voted in favor, breaking the tie.

The vote came after hours of public comment, most of which was in opposition to a “hotel overlay zone” being proposed by the town administration. The original proposal sought to allow 50-foot hotels in the same area. Previous regulations restricted building height to 40 feet with special approval.

What was listed as a discussion on height restrictions became a wide-ranging debate on economic development and various other issues.

Town officials say the proposed “hotel overlay zone” is meant to entice the development of modern accommodations. Town manager Rick Bellis has complained that many of Taos’ hotels are outdated or in disrepair, and investors are unwilling to build within the existing rules.

As the town government pours more effort into promoting events and improving tourism, Bellis says the town will need more rooms to catch more overnight visitors.

But opponents of the proposal say raising the height restriction would come at the expense of Taos’ quaint charm. Taller structures are not of an appropriate scale, they argue, and will block mountain views while turning off would-be visitors.

Much of the public comment focused on issues beyond hotel construction. Many speakers stressed the need for economic development and affordable housing. One person talked about runoff and the condition of arroyos running through town. There was even a call for ejecting corporate businesses from town altogether.

While the debate technically dealt with a generic zoning issue, a developer who wants to build inside the overlay area spoke at length about his specific project, and fielded questions from the audience. The developer, Jay Batra, has already had a proposed four-story Holiday Inn Express rejected. The increased height restriction may make it easier to get his project approved. To do so, he will have to resubmit an application to the town.

Hank Saxe, a resident of Ranchos de Taos, argued in opposition to Batra’s project. “We’re really talking about precedent,” Saxe said. “By getting your way, you’d also be opening the door to who knows how many structures that will dramatically alter the skyline eventually.”

Town councilor Fernandez had proposed a compromise late in the discussion: Rather than OK 50-foot hotels at the far end of town, why not allow 40-foot hotels anywhere, including near the historic district? “Why are we focusing on sprawl when we should be focusing on enticing investment in the downtown?” Fernandez asked. But Barrone said the town had tried for years to court hotel developers

but hadn't found any that were willing to invest. He said increasing the height limit might actually get something going.

"We need to start somewhere," Barrone said.

The new height restrictions will not go into effect until the town council adopts more stringent architectural standards, which would apply to a new development.



Town officials have approved a zoning change to allow 48-foot hotels at the south end of Taos. A four-story Holiday Inn Express is being planned for a property adjacent to the Hampton Inn (at right).

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