

Forum on Taos education, economy draws common threads

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Throughout the last six months of reporting — “Small Towns, Big Change” — a media collaboration with other newsrooms in New Mexico and Colorado, some of the stories that once seemed laden with insurmountable problems and precious few resources revealed themselves to have newsworthy solutions. For reporters somewhat familiar with the scope of the problem, our curiosities were enticed and hopes kindled.

At the end of this phase of the project and the beginning of another, *The Taos News* hosted a community conversation which took place at the Harwood Museum of Art Nov. 16.

Based on dozens of conversations over months of researching, as well as drawn from the experience of fellow reporters involved with the project across the Upper Rio Grande region, it was natural for the conversation to focus on a common refrain: the links between education and the economy.

One theme that emerged was that elusive words don't cut it when trying to work towards a specific future. As the expression goes: the devil's in the details.

Education and economy — the very focal point on the conversation — both demand specificity.

What skills and knowledge should local schools teach students so they have the chance to live and work close to home? For many in the business world, the answer is “soft skills” like the ability to communicate and show up.

And what can the business community and local institutions do to create better paying jobs and make sure opportunities exist for young people? For those in the schools, the answer is a commitment to show up where teachers and educators are already strapped for time and resources.

Both worlds have to share the burden. But for that, we must take stock of where we are.

Institutionally, there's a lot going on. A panel of locals set the stage for this.

Carla Chavez, a health science teacher at Taos High School, has been intimately involved in the creation of a health care pipeline with the University of New Mexico-Taos and Holy Cross Hospital, in addition to “High schools at Work,” an initiative to direct academic progress in high school toward real jobs and careers.

Chavez said work from the top has to happen before students can take total ownership over the process.

She was joined by Oban Lambie, owner of Brown Rice Internet, who spoke to the “selfish” reasoning behind going in the schools twice a week to teach programming — he wants capable workers from Taos.

Louis Moya, who is now heading the newly created UNM-Taos Business Center, as well as Marcia Brenden with the Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations, based at New Mexico Highlands University joined the panel, along with two students from Taos High School, Asher Vigil and Nora Steinberg.

But energy doesn't just come from institutions, it comes from the bottom up, too.

As those in the audience made clear, people care and are willing to be involved. For some, the lack of knowledge about what's already going on is a barrier. For others, especially those with young families and kids, childcare is a need that keeps people from being as active as they could.

Panelists said the energy of a community is not always a matter of "funding," yet another elusive word.

The truth of the matter is that funding is always short; constantly pointing the finger at the one-size-fits all word occludes other vital assessments — namely, cleverly and cooperatively managing the actual, tangible assets at hand, like people and time.

Big visions — whether they're fully in synch or not — need the commitments to make them happen. Again, it has to come from above and below.

If the community is going to be serious about mentoring — giving young people more chances to see their communities at work — then connections have to be made so important transitions (from seasonal jobs to full-time employment or meaningful internships) aren't squandered.

But for all the people incredibly motivated in the schools, volunteering and visioning for Taos County, there are others who don't fit the bill of a traditional student or mentor. Being engaged means reaching beyond what's obvious or easy.

A big thank you from *The Taos News* to all those who attended, and for our many partners who made the event possible, including the Taos Community Foundation, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, New Mexico Business Excellence, UNM-Taos Digital Media Arts and the Harwood Museum of Art.

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