

## **Dispatch center tax could come before Taos voters**

### **Holy Cross Hospital considers 'Critical Access Hospital' status**

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Every two weeks, Taos County commissioners meet to discuss and vote on county business, policies and projects. Citizens are invited to speak at the beginning of meetings, which take place at 105 Albright St. Videos of the meetings are streamed live and posted on [taos22.com](http://taos22.com). Here's a rundown of two of the items discussed at the Dec. 6 meeting. Commissioner Gabe Romero was absent, and Commissioner Mark Gallegos called in to vote on a tax.

#### **911 dispatch center tax**

Taos County voters will decide in February whether or not to impose a new tax in order to permanently fund the 911 dispatch center.

Commissioners voted 3-1 to adopt the new tax. Candyce O'Donnell was the only dissenting vote for the "enabling ordinance." Another vote must be taken at the Dec. 20 county commission meeting to officially call for the February election.

The tax would add about 18 cents to a \$100 purchase and could generate between \$850,000 and \$870,000 a year, according to Taos County Manager Leandro Cordova.

The dispatch center is housed in the Taos County Complex but oversight comes from the "joint powers agreement" made up of the county, the town of Taos and other governmental entities in the area. Currently, the town and county both pay approximately \$350,000 a year to operate the dispatch center.

County leaders argue a tax specifically dedicated to funding the dispatch center would mean solid projections of revenue, fewer political bouts between the town and county, and better long-term planning for 911 and emergency communication technology.

The state statute that gives the county commission the authority to pursue the additional taxes does so for only limited purposes — emergency communications, other county- operated emergency services, or behavioral health and substance abuse treatments.

#### **'Critical access' hospital**

Bill Patten, CEO of Holy Cross Hospital, told the commission during his monthly "report card" that the hospital will be "moving forward with discussions" about becoming what is known as a "critical access" facility.

Becoming a critical access hospital is a matter of funding. Getting the federal designation would change the way the hospital is reimbursed for Medicare patients, effectively upping the bottom line while keeping the majority of services and staff intact.

Patten has argued that getting the designation could increase the hospital's annual budget by \$500,000 to \$1.5 million.

While the change may seem relatively superficial, it sparked controversy earlier this year when some hospital employees and the union raised concerns that the designation was not in the best interest of either the hospital or patients. A crucial vote by the HCH board of directors was delayed.

Following the issues with the union, the hospital held a series of all-staff meetings, as well as sent three groups of employees to see what critical access looks like in other hospitals.

Patten suggested there is growing support for becoming critical access, but cautioned that the hospital isn't yet married to the change.