

## **Economic development council still a dream after years of recommendations**

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In February 1999, the Taos Town Council adopted a comprehensive plan that included a section on how to jump-start economic development.

The jargon-y report called for the town to lead “formation of a centralized business resource and information center or clearinghouse which coordinates economic development activities, acts as a referral service for all small business providers, assists businesses in streamlining permitting processes, and provides statistical and descriptive information on economic facts and trends.”

The report, “Vision 20/20,” said the creation of such a clearinghouse was to be implemented by December 2000.

Since 1999, at least three other plans approved by local governments have called for a similar organization — some council or committee that would direct and coordinate economic development efforts in the Taos region. Yet almost two decades later, no such organization exists, at least not in the way it’s been proposed.

“You’ve got to get this thing together in order to find out what direction the community wants to go,” said Fred Peralta, who was Taos mayor when the 1999 plan was passed. “You can get people together in a room for a meeting, but if you don’t have someone to continually push it, it dies.”

Peralta said there have been multiple efforts to get some kind of group formed. But disagreements over who’s in charge, who’s going to pay for it and what economic development should even look like have stopped the effort dead in its tracks. Still, the idea keeps resurfacing.

This week, the Taos County Commission passed its own economic development plan. Once again, the plan calls for the creation of a public/private council to direct economic development.

In fact, the report authors say the “central and most important aspect of economic development efforts” would be the creation of an “Economic Development Department” that would be housed in the county, but have the support of municipalities within Taos County. The department would then create an “Economic Development Council” made up of public and private economic development organizations.

Gillian Joyce with R’o Chiquito Research and Consulting was the primary author of the report. She says a “systematic approach” is necessary to overcome some of the huge hurdles to economic development in Taos County. But that takes coordination.

“Without an orchestrated board of people working to expediently and proactively engage with economic development, there’s no way it can happen,” Joyce said Jan. 11. “It’s like playing football without an offense.”

Joyce’s conclusion echoes the economic development portion of the county’s 2006 comprehensive plan. That plan listed as its first goal the creation of an “Economic Development Task Force.” The task force would be comprised of “representatives from the various municipalities and economic development organizations that can prepare the research and strategic plan for achieving the goals and strategies, as well as other action tasks recommended in this plan.”

In some ways, that proposal is once again similar to the “principal recommendation” from a 2013 plan commissioned by the town of Taos. That plan called for leaders to “create and develop a regional economic development organization” as the first step toward making things happen.

“Currently there is no single entity that has as its sole focus the development of the economy of the Enchanted Circle region,” reads the town report, prepared by consultants LEAP Partners. “We believe that without such an entity the remainder of this action plan will be moot.”

The county’s current plan strays from the LEAP plan on at least one key point. The LEAP report insists that no one government should have control of the council. It should stand alone.

“Governments suck at economic development,” said Matt Spriggs, a co-author of the LEAP report, in an interview this week. Spriggs said governments tend to focus solely on tax revenue. True economic development, he argued, is much bigger than that and also requires at least equal buy-in from the private sector.

But if every report on improving the Taos economy has pushed for some kind of council dedicated to economic development, why has it been so challenging to make it happen?

“The big issue is you have no political will,” Spriggs said. “There’s nobody who understands or is willing to create the partnerships that are going to be required in order for people to start doing the heavy lifting.”

Spriggs was recently appointed by Taos Mayor Dan Barrone to the “Mayor’s Economic Development Advisory Board.” Spriggs said he hoped the creation of such a board is a step toward forming a larger independent entity that would look beyond the borders of any one municipality and push for economic development at a larger scale.

Such organizations exist in communities across the country, including in Durango, Colorado, a resort community that’s sometimes pointed to as a model Taos should emulate.

The La Plata County Economic Development Alliance was formed in 2011 and is “a diverse group of private businesses and public agencies working towards a common goal: to foster the economic success of our community.”

The alliance has identified and is currently focused on three initiatives: improved air service, a new business park and high-speed internet to every home and business in the county.

The Colorado-based alliance has three employees. The board includes business owners and elected officials, and its funding comes from governments and the private sector.

According to its 2015 annual report, it had a budget of around \$350,000. About \$107,000 of its revenue came from public contributions and \$175,000 came from private contributions. The remainder of its revenue came from programs, interest and events.

Whether such an organization can gain traction in Taos remains to be seen. One initial hurdle could be finding agreement on what economic development in the Enchanted Circle should even look like. Taos is unusually diverse, especially if you include communities like Angel Fire and Eagle Nest.

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### **New traction?**



Many think Taos would benefit from an economic development plan.

Katharine Egli