

Shift in Mexican and legacy Hispano population ‘biggest change’

Ta o s C o u n t y demographics cited in newly adopted comprehensive plan

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The past several weeks have been a period when the size and role of the United States' immigrant population is under national attention because of presidential policy and a countervailing sanctuary movement. While pushing for actual laws and resolutions concerning protections for immigrants is central to that movement, so is reckoning with the role immigrants play in different communities.

“Hispanics identifying as being of Mexican origin account for almost all of the growth [in Taos County] among Hispanics, and are the ethnic group with, by far and away, the strongest and largest population growth in the decade,” reads a Taos County comprehensive plan that was adopted by commissioners Feb. 7 and authored by the consulting firm Community By Design.

The report states that the population of Mexican Hispanics increased 170.7 percent in the last 10 years. That community now accounts for 18.4 percent of the total population of the county. When the Taos County commissioners approved a duo of strategic planning documents, many of the goals — like preserving and supporting acequias — were unchanged from the last time similar plans were written. However, the one variable in the last decade that will drive development in the next one is who actually lives in Taos.

The shift in the Mexican and legacy Hispano population, along with market economics brought on by the Great Recession and subsequent recovery, “is the biggest change,” said Rudy Perea of the county’s planning department.

While Hispanics make up about 56 percent of Taos County, the “legacy Hispano” population is “decreasing at a worrying rate,” according to the report.

The population of legacy Hispanos dropped 19.4 percent, it states, leaving the current legacy Hispano population at about 37 percent of all Taos County residents.

The Anglo population grew 18 percent over the decade and accounts for 36.8 percent of the total population, up from 33.8 percent in 2000, the report said, which also states that people of Navajo and Apache decent, not people from pueblos, account for the largest growth within the Native American community in the county.

The population growth of Taos County and the specific increases and decreases in various demographics are also tied to the state of the housing market.

According to the report, mobile homes are the dominant form of affordable housing in Taos. For perspective of how much of the housing market that accounts for, mobile homes make up 17 percent of all housing in Taos County — compared to 16 percent in the state and only 6 percent nationwide.

Meanwhile, almost 35 percent of the county's 20,269 housing units are vacant — compared to about 16 percent in New Mexico and 12.5 percent nationwide. About 23 percent of all houses in the county are for seasonal, recreational or occasional use, the report states.

If the purpose of the county's comprehensive and economic development plans is realized, future planning — that is, the minutiae of local regulations, codes and ordinances — will take these dynamics into account.

As Perea explained to *The Taos News*, those local regulations are where “the rubber meets the road.”

“These bird's-eye-level goals [in the planning documents] give the county the guidance to what we work on. It's a map for us to implement regulations,” he said. And that, he said, “is a long, slow process.”

For example, the revision to the county's land use regulations in 2014 was the culmination of at least eight years of work by the planning department.

While responding to the changes in the community demographics is part of the reason behind updating the county's outdated plans, so is funding. The state requires local municipalities to have updated plans in order to apply for various grants and loans earmarked for economic development. But that's not an unfunded mandate, as the state also gave the county \$50,000 to update the plans.



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