

## Taosenos demand town leaders revisit code on taller hotels

By **Cody Hooks**, [chooks@taosnews.com](mailto:chooks@taosnews.com)

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A group of citizens is demanding town leaders revisit a 2016 decision to allow taller hotels in Taos because of the precedence it could set and the erosion it could eventually cause to the historic scale of Taos' architectural landscape.

Generally, Taos has a restriction on buildings taller than 27 feet. In October, the town council voted to allow hotels up to 48 feet in a special "hotel overlay zone" at the southern end of the town in hopes of stirring economic development.

Jay Batra, a hotelier with properties in Taos, wants to build a four-story Holiday Inn Express adjacent to Hampton Inn Taos, which he owns. The efforts to increase the height limits within the special zone gained steam after Batra's original proposal for a new hotel was rejected.

Even though the decision to allow taller hotels within the special zone was made almost five months ago, those in opposition have ensured the issue isn't going away.

### **Petition**

Lawrence Baker, a Taos resident opposed to taller hotels, presented during a Feb. 28 town council meeting a petition demanding the town revisit its hotel ordinance and knock the height limit back down.

Of the 3,238 signatures collected, Baker estimates 78 percent are Taos Valley residents and 84 percent are New Mexicans.

Among the opponents' concerns is that a hotel at the maximum height would actually exceed that limit because of architectural additions to hide rooftop equipment allowed in the ordinance.

While the Taos County Administrative/Judicial Complex has been used as an example of a building that stands 48 feet tall, Baker argues that "how you measure the building is key." Only a single stairwell at the complex reaches 48 feet, while the remainder of the building stands significantly under that height, she said.

"You know this. I know this. And the general public knows this. People see through this ruse. ... They know a 48-foot hotel could reach even bigger heights," she told the council.

Furthermore, opponents argue that even a single four-story hotel would open the floodgates for other such development, which in turn would dismantle the town's historic and quaint look.

Baker and others offered several cautionary tales — including Santa Fe and Boulder, Colorado — where "worldclass scenery" was ruined by "incrementally larger and larger buildings."

Also among the issues at play is that the decision to allow taller hotels sacrifices smart planning for future development for a quick buck.

The hotel overlay zone “is going a little bit too far for one guy [Batra] to get this kind of deal to change the skyline of Taos,” said resident Bob Bishop.

“What concerns me the most is that [the ordinance] was a shortsighted decision. Teaming up with the Holiday Inn is a quick decision to bring in money for the town. If we need places for tourists to come and stay, [build them] in a sustainable way that actually offers something to the uniqueness of Taos,” said resident Jacquelyn Cordova.

“This may be your vision for Taos, but it is not the people’s,” Baker told the council.

### **Why now?**

Baker told *The Taos News* the issue of taller hotels is being brought to the town council now because the opportunities for public input was minimal.

She argues the public was not properly notified during the early stages of the hotel zoning efforts. The town has previously denied that, citing a conversation with an attorney who argued notice requirements were met for the particular type of rezoning in question.

Baker also claims an Oct. 4, 2016, work-study session ahead of the town council vote was orchestrated to minimize public input and keep the decision from the public eye.

“This session was proposed ... to specifically discuss the hotel overlay zone. Yet when the agenda came out, it had 10 items ahead of it [that] were discussed at great length. ... The council chambers were overflowing [with those in opposition to the ordinance] and after several hours of nonrelevant agenda items, many people simply had to leave. It is so obvious that this was on purpose,” Baker told *The Taos News*.

The town council voted to allow taller hotels Oct. 11, 2016, with town councilors Nathaniel Evans and Fritz Hahn voting for it, councilors Judi Cantu and Darien Fernandez against it and Taos Mayor Dan Barrone breaking the tie with an affirmative vote.

Though it was difficult for citizens to mount an opposition before the October votes, dissenting voices are still valid and ought to be taken into consideration, Baker argues.

Councilor Hahn rejected the significance of the signatures.

“Petitions are nice ... but a legal petition requires a number of different things. I take issue with the fact that just because the hall [council chamber] is packed, that’s a bona fide indicator of the citizens’ feelings,” Hahn said.

Hahn compared the opposition to four-story hotels to the fight against a big-box Walmart. “When we were fighting [that], we had no time, but we organized quickly and we were able to stall, deflect and eventually defeat the ordinance,” he said. Hahn also claimed that group of dissenters was able to gather 11,000 legitimate signatures.

### **Future action**

Fernandez said toward the end of the meeting that he’d like to amend the hotel overlay ordinance to restrict buildings to 40 feet and only three stories (rather than revoting on the ordinance, a more onerous and politically difficult option). The council declined to put the matter on the next meeting agenda.

However, Baker and a group of residents have filed an appeal to the town's ordinance in district court, she said.



A group of Taos residents is demanding the town council revisit a 2016 decision to allow hotels on the south end of town to reach heights up to 48 feet. Jay Batra, a developer, is planning on building one such hotel, a Holiday Inn Express, which opponents claim will set a precedent for taller buildings that will ruin views and the historic feel of Taos.

Photo by John Miller



The notice on the sign shows the date of a March 1 meeting with the planning and zoning committee.

Photo by John Miller

