

My Turn

Reflections on a Taos high-rise horror

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Thursday evening's (May 18) Planning and Zoning Commission meeting was an event which will go down in our memory-books as an embarrassment to all who participated. It began with the free-for-all of Chairman Pollard expressing rudeness and condescension with those who disagreed with him, referring to the Commission as "the jury." He even went as far as to threaten speakers with expulsion from the meeting, telling one speaker that "this is ridiculous," and another speaker, who was told to express viewpoints later in the meeting, was then told this was not the forum in which to speak. Some who asked questions were allowed more time, others who ran a bit over had the microphone shut off. In discussion with the developer regarding fair hiring for construction and employment, he even went so far as to say that the developer might find this problematic to honor and ought not to feel bound by hiring locally. So much for Taos employment opportunities. The meeting was convened, recessed, placed in private session at the whim of Chairman Pollard.

At one point informally, Commissioner Lukes who had recused himself, said 90 percent of Taosenos wanted the four-story high rise Holiday Inn, while other figures were bandied about ranging from 20 to 3,000 people in opposition. A not insignificant number, considering the impact this development will have on future of Taos and the surrounding area. No one really knows because no one has bothered to find out. Given the opportunity one or more three-story hotels - with conference facilities - might meet or exceed the current rush to accommodate an out-of-state corporation, which obviously benefits from leaving the largest footprint building possible.

E-mails revealed between the City Manager and the Developer (*Taos News*, May 11) even go so far as to suggest boldly that another site plan might well have been successful, thereby eliminating the controversial need to significantly raise the existing building code ceiling and site print.

It is still unclear by plans presented, whether this building is actually 48 feet or closer to 60 feet since the roof parapet and elevation are not clearly delineated. Nor is their clear documentation of view shed, drainage plan, setback, or in-house architectural review.

A lawsuit is pending yet still the "Coming Soon Holiday Inn Express" is already situated on the property. Yet the revised plan, previously version rejected, is now pending before the City Council. The Planning and Zoning returned from closed session to approve this large-scale development permit and resubmitted plans in a 5-0 vote. This was perhaps the only time when the chairman expressed any comprehension of participants' dissenting viewpoints. It will now move to the Town Council in the near future where public comment may again be possible and where a final decision is likely to be rendered. Previously, the Council faced a split decision with Mayor Barrone casting the deciding vote in favor with an exception to a contemporary Zoning Plan, which has never actually been tested.

There can be no doubt that Taos needs and wants tourism revenue and that future development and modernization of the infrastructure would be a boon in the historic district.

However, this is surely not the way to proceed, with contention in the face of alternatives which have not yet been explored, privileged arrangements before officials were on records, and tourism which will again suffer as soon as visitors get a view of our decaying and vacant downtown historic district.

Are we Taosenos really so desperate for 85-new guestrooms (with no conference facility) that we will put the future of Taos on the line for it? Or are we willing to slow down what has already been an inept and sluggish process and perhaps open up review and bidding to others who may wish to honor the current Zoning plans and the historic and artistic diversity which has made Taos a compelling landmark in the American West for over 100-years. Given a real opportunity for consideration, I think Taosenos would answer a resounding, "Yes."

Landau is a resident of Ranchos de Taos and photographer with local representation, he spent much of his professional career as a health care and housing advocate on a state and federal level.

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