

One story, two story, three story, four

Taos wrestles with allowing taller hotels while other places stick with shorter ones

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While the town of Taos Planning and Zoning Commission passed on a recommendation to the Taos Town Council to approve the building of a four-story Holiday Inn Express, the question remains as to why such a tall building is needed.

The hotel developer and the hotel's parent company insisted a four-story hotel was needed to accommodate modern conveniences favored by travelers, but several other three-story Holiday Inn Express projects have been built or are underway in other states.

In Taos, the planning commission May 18 passed the recommendation for the four-story hotel, leaving it one step away from approval. The hotel, originally proposed in 2016, was denied by the planning commission three times prior to being passed, according to developer Jay Batra, and now awaits the council's decision. If built, the Holiday Inn Express would become the tallest hotel building in Taos, slightly taller than the La Fonda Hotel. It would not be taller than the Taos County Administration/Judicial Complex, which is at least 48 feet high.

"For individuals or folks that don't see a need for one and want existing infrastructures to be fixed, it is just simply baffling, as some of those structures are beyond repair and the owners for those know it very well," Batra said in a recent email. "On the three stories, we asked the question to InterContinental Hotels Group and were flat out told 'no' as it does not fit their prototype. They are phasing out a 3 story structure Holiday Inn Express in Santa Fe and so why would they let me build ... three stories?"

InterContinental Hotels Group owns the Holiday Inn Express chain and other hotel brands.

Prior to the hotel coming before the public, Taos held a building code of no more than 27 feet, which prompted hotels to build two-story buildings in the area. In an October 2016 Taos Town Council meeting, the restrictions were changed to include a height increase in the code in the "Hotel Overlay Zone" in the southern portion of town. Along Paseo del Pueblo Sur, in a lot across from the Sagebrush Inn, where a sign announces the pending arrival of Holiday Inn Express, the height requirements were changed from the initial height of 27 feet to 48 feet to be able to accommodate taller hotel structures. The entire Hotel Overlay Zone, which includes the area just north of Este Es Road and just south of Do-a Ana Drive, was created by the town to accommodate larger hotels.

According to the town codes, the zone was created to spur economic growth and allow for more modern hotels in the area.

While three-story hotels may be on the way out in New Mexico, several three-story Holiday Inn Expresses have been on track for approval recently around the country within the past three years. Three-story Holiday Inn Expresses have been approved in Alliance, Nebraska; Tonawanda, New York; and Bordentown, New Jersey, among other locations across the

country. The hotel in Tonawanda was originally proposed as a four-story property, but was negotiated down in 2015 when town residents expressed concerns with the height of the building and an attorney for the town mentioned officials were considering a moratorium on buildings taller than height codes. Despite the three-story hotel projects across the nation, some developers and city governments seem determined to add an extra story.

“Because of all the new development in downtown Detroit, the convention and visitor’s bureau identified a need for additional hotel rooms,” said Scott Adkins, city manager in Roseville, Michigan. “The site is a very narrow strip of property, and to maximize return on their investment, they needed the additional floor space.”

A Holiday Inn Express in Roseville was granted a variance to the city codes to reach a fourth story for the property and was approved for construction in May of 2017. The project has issues similar to the ones being faced in Taos. The hotel is in a location that typically only allowed for smaller structures. With the variance to the property, Adkins said the first floor of the hotel was only designed to have eight rooms, with the rest of the bottom floor devoted to a conference room and other amenities. The majority of the 100 rooms will be on the third and fourth stories. Adkins mentioned that the lot the hotel is to be built on had been vacant for more than 30 years and that opponents to the hotel were simply used to having the lot empty rather than with a building on it.

Some residents of Taos said at the most recent Planning and Zoning Commission meeting that while they understand economic development and more hotel rooms are needed in Taos, they feel the goal could be achieved without compromising the height ordinances of the town.

Elements of the Hotel Overlay Zone still require building developers to apply for permits to match the height requirements and other aesthetic conditions. According to the codes, buildings must be in the Pueblo/ Spanish revival style of building and they are not to exceed four stories at this time. Any hotel exceeding 27 feet or two stories is considered a largescale development under the code and builders must apply for a large-scale hotel development permit. The facade of the buildings must resemble elements of Taos Pueblo or The Loretto Inn in Santa Fe with stucco exterior.

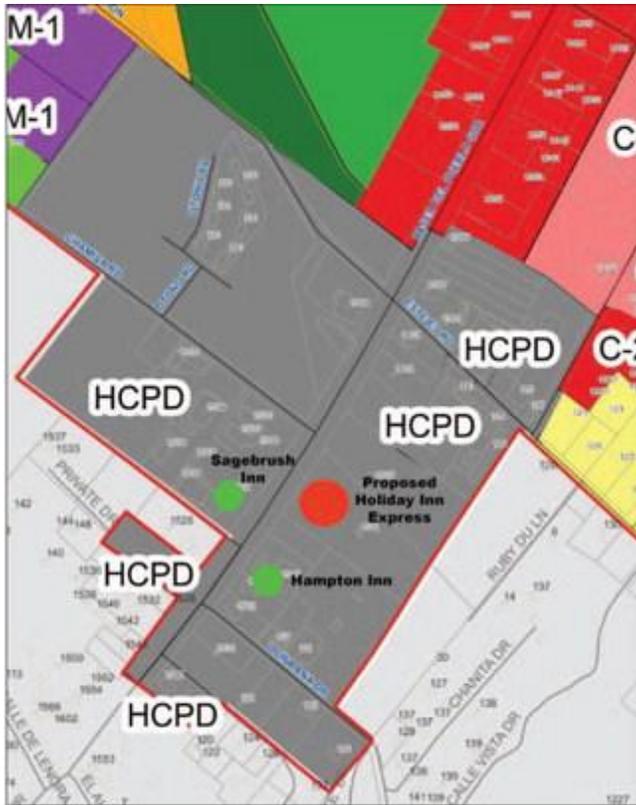
“An \$8 million structure needs to be built with today’s and tomorrow’s picture in mind and not so much what happened years ago,” Batra said via email. “While I care about town’s sentiments, this is much more than a 4 stories discussion as it has been for years for some folks being stuck in their philosophies, as contradictory as they might be.”

If you go: Taos Town Council meeting

What: Regular Taos Town Council meeting hearing the request for the Holiday Inn Express construction

When: Tuesday, June 27, 3 p.m.

Where: Town council chambers, 120 Civic Plaza Drive



The dark gray shaded area represents the Hotel Overlay Zone in Taos, in which the height restrictions have been lifted to 48 feet to allow for four-story hotels.

Courtesy graphic

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