

## Citizens tackle downtown Taos' future

By Jesse Moya, [jmoya@taosnews.com](mailto:jmoya@taosnews.com)

*The Taos News*, 6/15/2017

More than 200 people attended Monday's (June 12) "Strong At Heart" community meeting to discuss the future of downtown Taos, but the demographic left some city officials still struggling to figure out how to reach a broader section of the community.

Using colored dots, people at the meeting self-identified on boards divided into sections for race, income and age. Based on that survey, most people attending were older than 45, Anglo Taos residents who either made less than \$35,000 or more than \$75,000 per household income.

While an abundance of participants at the discussion found the events helpful and progressive for the community, there was a faction of people who found the event to be less than valuable.

"The idea, the motivation behind it is vital, it's necessary; it's part of life," said resident Mark Kemper. "I don't think the way it's being done is at all valid. I think there's preconceived notions about what the outcome is intended to be, that whatever they write down will be thrown away and by bringing in outside facilitators, who happen to all be white men, they're closed-minded. It's a corporation that sells itself to build community."

Still, people at the meeting said talking about the issues is a good step.

"I really appreciate the leadership coming from the town and I think this is a great start to what hopefully will be a great process," said resident Erik Schlenker-Goodrich. "I thought people were really positive and really willing to share their ideas. People were talking, there was a dialogue."

The evening began around 5:30 p.m. when guests began pouring into the Chamisa Ballroom at the Sagebrush Inn & Suites. Tables with markers, paper and other office supplies were laid out for participants in group discussions in addition to the several anonymous surveys posted on the back wall of the room. After a brief speech from some of the governing bodies within the town, ideas began flowing as group facilitators took to their tables gathering information and ideas from residents in the town.

In a small focus group-style manner, ideas, suggestions and observations of the town were tossed in the air and finalized on paper to be shared with the entire room. Tension and disagreements could be heard spouting from some tables, but ultimately those involved with the process said it was a positive atmosphere and a much-needed discussion.

Facilitators guided several groups of around eight participants each at tables to discuss the pros and cons of the town and to begin building toward a community plan for the future of Taos and the downtown district. Organizers say the overall process will take several months to complete.

Many of the citizens at the meeting weren't optimistic about the ability to keep young people in town. Using sticky notes on a board, members of the community made it abundantly clear that one of the major issues the town needs to work on is more opportunities for the area's youth.

“I was impressed with the turnout and I’m excited to talk about opportunities for our community to grow stronger,” said resident Rachel Conn, who works with the nonprofit group Amigos Bravos. “It was interesting to see the common themes. There was a lot of the same concepts of strengths and weaknesses in our town.”

Several people during the evening mentioned a breakdown of trust or a disconnect between the government and residents in town, something Councilor Darien Fernandez cited as one of the reasons for the continued discussions during his speech.

Monday’s meeting was part of a four-step process for “Strong At Heart,” which will include planned meetings lasting up to December. According to the downtown strategy plan listed on the group’s website, step one is focused on defining community values and assessing the strengths, opportunities and challenges present in the community. Steps two and three will be focused on moving toward the implementation of the overall plan for what the downtown community and residents of Taos decide for the future.

The end goal of the discussions is, according to organizers, to summarize community values, goals and strategies, along with guiding principles of the town and have a plan to set everything in motion. Community support is crucial to the discussions and those involved are asking anyone interested to attend in the future. The group is looking to expand the discussion’s reach further into the community to include recreation groups, neighborhoods, acequia associations and many others.

“This process and project, I think, is critical at this time due to the changes that we are all facing here in this community,” said Taos Councilor Nathaniel Evans during the meeting. “We have a very diverse community. I’m invested in this project and hope that we can reach as many of the community members that do this planning correct and start from the ground up and really listen to the people.”

Additional events will be held in July. For more information on “Strong At Heart,” visit [downtowntaos.com](http://downtowntaos.com).