

Community conversations set stage for future decision-making

Report courtesy Strong at Heart

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What does it mean to love Taos' natural beauty? Its cultural diversity? Its small-town feel? Why do these things matter, and how can local leaders make decisions that honor these values?

Strong at Heart, a collaborative effort between the town of Taos and community partners, is hosting a series of community conversations to dig deeper into those often intangible elements that define our community's sense of place.

Strong at Heart organizers worked throughout June and July collecting information from people within Taos. The collected information provides a solid start to understanding what Taosenos love about living here.

Upcoming community conversations take the next step in this conversation and dig into why those things matter to people.

It is crucial that Taosenos show up.

Community conversations are not your typical community meetings. They will feature small group discussions in which each participant tells their story about why living in the Taos area is important to them and their hopes for the area's future.

Residents will be encouraged to not only talk about what they love about the Taos area, but to also think about why they value those things. Community members will then reflect on these stories, identifying the values rooted in each and where we share common ground. From those conversations emerges greater clarity about what makes Taos so special.

"Most communities will say they love 'natural beauty' and 'diversity,'" said Marjo Curgus of Del Corazon Consulting, who's been hired to help organize outreach for Strong at Heart.

"However, unless we understand why these things are important to people and what benefits they provide, it is hard to know how decision-making can support or enhance those benefits."

Community conversations work best in small group formats. The format and organization of each will be the same - the only difference being the stories people share. For that reason, organizers are providing five separate opportunities for people to participate. Space in all of these venues is limited to between 50 and 80 people.

Dates and locations of the conversations include:

- Monday, Aug. 28, 6-8 p.m., St. James Episcopal Church, Parish Hall, 208 Camino de Santiago.
- Tuesday, Aug. 29, 5:30-7:30 p.m., Coronado Building, El Taoseno Room, 120 Civic Plaza Drive.
- Wednesday, Aug. 30, 3-5 p.m., Taos Public Library, 402 Camino de la Placita.

- Wednesday, Aug. 30, 6-8 p.m., Coronado Building, El Taoseno Room, 120 Civic Plaza Drive.
- Thursday, Aug. 31, 5:30 - 7:30 p.m., Taos High School, cafeteria, 134 Cervantes St.

Clearly defined community values are essential to the final outcomes of Strong at Heart. Draft community values statements will be developed in September based on community input. These statements will help inform the community vision and downtown strategy. The project will identify ways local government, organizations, businesses and citizens can work together to build upon Taos' strengths. The goal is to manage growth and change in a way that protects the elements that are essential to Taos staying Taos.

Strong at Heart will then transition the project's focus on the heart of the community — our downtown. The project aims to make downtown Taos more vibrant and welcoming to all. Accomplishing that goal will build on the foundation of public input being collected now. It will also require extensive public participation in November and December to ensure the project is a community effort.

If you can't attend a community conversation, you still have a chance to participate. The Strong at Heart website features an online questionnaire that includes the prompts used in person. The questionnaire, as well as more information about Strong at Heart, can be found at downtowntaos.com.

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