

## Taos town council approves three-story hotel

**Holiday Inn Express developer reduces project from four stories after public outcry**

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The Taos Town Council met in a regular meeting Tuesday (Aug. 22) and unanimously passed a motion to approve a three-story Holiday Inn Express.

The decision comes nearly two months after developer Jay Batra decided to ask the council not to vote on the originally proposed four-story hotel, saying he wanted to try to design a shorter building at the request of many town residents. Tuesday's discussion and vote was a continuation from the June 27 meeting where the Town Council was set to vote on the controversial four-story hotel before Batra requested they postpone the vote until he could seek a compromise between the town residents who opposed the project and the Intercontinental Hotel Group, the owners of the Holiday Inn Franchise.

"Hopefully, I think the smaller crowd here maybe saw some kind of consensus," said Town Manager Rick Bellis. "Maybe, as Councilor Evans said, people will come out a little earlier in the process."

After the vote was cast on the hotel, many of the audience got up to leave, although Councilor Nathaniel Evans encouraged them to stay for the additional information included in the meeting, which included the recently updated Infrastructure Capital Improvement Plan. The plan, passed by the council, lays out the costs of the major projects the town has upcoming for several years. Some of the projects included in the plan are a fire fighter training facility, water system upgrades, affordable housing and a dog park.

Open opposition to the hotel was still present at the meeting before the council voted, with some people requesting that the new three-story hotel project be sent back to the Planning and Zoning Commission for further review. However Bellis said during the meeting that the commission did not feel it necessary to revisit the entire project. Senior Town Planner John Miller also said that the revised three-story version of the hotel met all necessary criteria to be approved.

Despite the developer's compromise and the assurance of the town that the new designs were clear for approval, there were some in the audience who still urged for a two-story design rather than the compromised three.

Still, the majority of those who spoke at the recent meeting commented in favor of the hotel and development in Taos. Speakers, including former town councilman Andrew Gonzales, said that growth is needed in Taos and that the hotel is just a part of that growing process.

"I'm happy to see this is moving forward," said Gonzales during the meeting. "I think one of our biggest issues today is a lack of growth."

Community members such as Brian Greer, Director of the Family and Youth Center, also spoke during the meeting and stated that many who come for swimming or hockey tournaments often complain about the existing hotels in Taos and that new rooms are needed to house these visitors who will often end up staying a few days for a tournament or other events.

As it stands, the hotel will now move forward in the building process. The town attorney will provide the council with a summary of the project and a finding of facts, which will not change the outcome of the vote, according to Bellis.

Previously, town officials were looking at possibly passing a four-story model of the Holiday Inn Express to be built within the Hotel Overlay Zone on Paseo del Pueblo Sur. The overlay zone allowed for a variance to the existing 40-foot height limit on buildings in Taos, permitting buildings to reach 48 with permission from the town. But after continued outcry against the four-story hotel proposal, the hotel developer requested the council allow him to explore the option of a three-story hotel. Many praised Batra for his willingness to compromise following the June meeting.

“The compromise that we reached today will pave the way for the kind of economic development that can be supported by all Taosenos,” said Mayor Dan Barrone in a statement. “I extend my thanks to Jay Batra for reaching out to IHG to seek approval on a three-story alternative to his original plans – it takes everyone working together to make something like this happen. And I also want to thank everyone who took the time to voice their opinions and to get involved on this issue. It is an honor to serve you and live among such fine neighbors.”

The hotel will still be in the style of the Pueblo/Spanish revival as required under the Town codes, and will essentially look much like the originally proposed design with the top floor taken out.



**The mock-up drawing of the exterior of the newly approved Holiday Inn Express from Paseo del Pueblo Sur as it could appear when built. Town council passed the resolution allowing for the go-ahead on the controversial hotel which many Taosenos have been polarized against since its introduction to the public.**