

Meeting to focus on community values, planning for the future

– *Strong At Heart* report

The Taos News, 10/19/2017

The public is invited to review the results of a monthslong effort to define what the Taos community values, what it's worried about and ways to deal with those challenges.

“Strong at Heart” – an ongoing effort by several Taos partners to improve community relationships so residents can preserve what's special about Taos while adapting to change – will host “On Taos Time: A Discussion About Our Past, Present and Future.” The event is scheduled for Oct. 30 from 5:30-8 p.m. in the Historic County Courthouse Mural Room on Taos Plaza. Free food and child care will be provided.

At the meeting, the “Strong at Heart” team will present the results of recent surveys and community conversations focused on what people love about Taos. Since the project kicked off in June, more than 1,000 Taos area residents of all ages and diverse backgrounds participated in meetings, interviews, focus groups, online surveys and pop-up events.

Based on that outreach, “Strong at Heart” identified eight core themes that define what Taosenos love about their community, including:

- The value of living in a unique and small town.
- The interdependence of the land, air and water that sustain us.
- The joy of living in a caring community.
- The individual freedom that comes from an abundance of creativity and an accepting culture.
- Our connection and ease of access to the outdoors.
- The importance of children and families.
- Honoring the legacy and heritage of the Taos Pueblo and Spanish cultures.

Ultimately, the “Strong at Heart” project hopes to use final values statements to prompt a more specific discussion about how to deal with current economic and social challenges while protecting the things we care most about.

At the Oct. 30 meeting, the “Strong at Heart” team will provide a summary of the community input to date. Attendees will then break out into smaller discussion groups and will be asked to think about how Taos has changed, in both good and bad ways. Finally, groups will discuss the future and set goals for how to strengthen and protect community values in the face of that change.

During the outreach process, residents were also asked about their hopes for the future. Most said there's a need to find balance between building a stronger economy, improving quality of life and protecting the things that make Taos unique.

At the “On Taos Time” meeting, residents will also be asked to consider some of the top challenges identified by locals over the last few weeks. According to people who have shared their thoughts with “Strong at Heart” so far, the negative effects of growth trends and economic conditions are the primary concerns.

Specific examples include:

- The fear of losing what makes Taos unique.
- The “brain drain” that occurs from lack of economic opportunity.
- Escalating costs of housing as people with more purchasing power move in.
- The apparent decline of local businesses, as evidenced by vacant buildings and shops.
- The strain that these issues put on Taos’ social fabric.

To help inform the discussion about the kind of change Taos is experiencing, “Strong At Heart” conducted research on a variety of topics, including population change, the economy, agriculture and housing.

Between now and Oct 30, these data “snapshots” will be released to help inform the dialogue at the Oct. 30 meeting.

For more information about the “On Taos Time” meeting and the “Strong at Heart” project, visit downtowntaos.com. “Strong at Heart” is a collaborative effort of community volunteers, as well as a growing list of organizations, including the town of Taos, Taos County, University of New Mexico-Taos, Holy Cross Hospital, the Taos County Chamber of Commerce, Taos Land Trust, the Taos Community Foundation, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps and Taos Alive. The project is being organized with the help of Community Builders, a nonprofit devoted to creating prosperous communities in the American West.