

Strong at Heart moves to second phase planning Taos' future

More than 1,000 Taosenos participate so far in effort to determine downtown purpose, needs

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After several months of collecting data within the community, Strong at Heart organizers moved into their second phase of operation with their public meeting Monday night (Oct. 30) at the Mural Room in the Old Taos County Courthouse.

Efforts to find out what Taosenos really value about Taos have been ongoing since the community initiative officially started in 2016 and those involved in the project have been taking the information around town. "In reaching out to people, you have to know those who will come to you," said Strong at Heart coordinator Jim Pollard. "We're identifying specific legacy families and we're having less success getting to the elders, but having more success getting to the children of those families. This is going to take a lot of effort."

Pop-up events have been held by the group at various events and locations to collect data from as many residents in the area as possible following the June 12 meeting where this initiative to create a more community-friendly Taos was introduced to the public. Moving out of the first phase of the project and into the second, the group has begun focusing in on the comments and data from the previous months and will ultimately be working on an action plan in December.

Organizers asked Taosenos broad questions about the community such as "What do you love about Taos," or "what are your hopes for the future." These questions brought in comments and suggestions for the group to interpret and led to several smaller meetings of community members where participants were grouped to discuss the exact meaning of some concerns and values citizens in Taos held. Over the course of several weeks, this data was collected and charted and displayed at the Monday meeting for the more than 100 people who attended.

"I do not like that it is hard for people to make a living and afford to live here," one anonymous commenter wrote. "We have a lot of 'out of towners' who don't rely on making money here to live here, and that hurts a lot of people. Also that we rely so heavily on tourists."

Monday's meeting, according to facilitators, was a way for Strong at Heart to make sure they heard the concerns of the community like this correctly over the last few months and to move forward with phase two.

The group now will draft several goals in phase two for Taos, based on the prior comments people gave regarding tradition, culture, industry and recreation. Sticky notes placed on boards were used to represent how well the values represented Taos in the present and the past while looking ahead towards the future as well.

"I think it's going very well," said Taos resident Mark Henderson. "I think this meeting was very useful compared to the 300 people that were at the Sagebrush. I think it's pretty foolish

for me, at 64, to be contemplating where I'd like things to be in 20 years, because I don't have a dog in that fight, except intellectually."

A majority of the participants in the Strong at Heart initiative identified themselves as being over 45 years old. The group is currently focusing on getting more youth out to participate in the discussions and get their input in the community plans for the future.

"We've tried our best to reach people, but we can always use help," said facilitator Marjo Curgus during the meeting.

Strong at Heart organizers have gone to several businesses in Taos, passing out their information which, according to Pollard, is more effective when they have face-to-face conversations with members of the community.

The next meeting will be held Nov. 27 to discuss the next step for the group. Details will be announced at a later date. The Strong at Heart project team, consisting of members of the community and various organizations within it, is largely responsible for the activities, data collections and interpretation as well as running the meetings. The group meets weekly. For more information on Strong at Heart, visit downtowntaos.com/.

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