

## Downtown Taos planning initiative wraps up phase two

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The Strong at Heart program, an initiative led by the town to gather community input on planning issues, met again with Taos residents Monday (Nov. 27) to finalize their discussions and move forward with their plan to better the downtown area.

Community members gathered for food and a presentation about the project's history over the past several months where Strong at Heart volunteers and employees collected data from residents in the town. Data ranged from demographics, like age brackets and income levels, as well as subjective, personal opinions, like what the community valued about Taos. Over the course of several months, the data were collected, analyzed and delivered to the community via meetings held by the group to present what mattered most to Taosians.

"People really, truly care about what goes on in our community," said Mayor Dan Barrone during Monday's meeting. "This was an opportunity for us to really invest in our community."

The smaller-than-usual crowd of around 60 people were split into discussion groups based on the issue that mattered most to their lives and were allowed to discuss these topics with a facilitator. Some discussions focused around the housing crisis in Taos, affordable living and future of economic progress in town.

Yet some groups pivoted into much more heated discussions of racial prejudice, causing some participants to walk out of the meeting before the end of the discussions.

Despite the tensions seen within some of the groups, many participants remain optimistic about the future of the project and are willing to stick with it for the long run. Several of the participants have been present at the discussions and meetings since the first public meeting held in June and find the process valuable for the future of Taos.

"I think [Strong at Heart] has faced criticism in its early stages of not being inclusive and I think they are doing a much better job," said Taos resident Irene Loy. "There are barriers to that that I think they are addressing in every way they know how, but we are still not 'there' yet."

Loy participated in a discussion about prejudice in Taos and feels that the intense conversation is an indication of some of the underlying issues within Taos that the people still have to work through before fully coming together. While the discussion

may have been intense and uncomfortable for those who left, Loy feels the initiative is worth the tension and has been present at several of the discussions in the past and plans to continue following the Strong at Heart initiative in the future.

Loy is not alone in her views and many present at the event are looking forward to the final action plan, which will be revealed once the data is analyzed.

Facilitators guided the discussions along and collected more data for the final phase of Strong at Heart, which will begin in January. That phase will implement an action plan for the future based on the results of previous meetings. The action plan will focus on bettering the downtown area of Taos and looking towards bettering the future based on the concerns and comments of those involved in the project, according to the Strong at Heart team.

“This is a marathon we are running,” said facilitator Marjo Curgus. “It’s not a sprint. It takes time.”



**Linda Yardley, of Taos Pueblo, speaks Monday (Nov. 27) during a discussion about how the town of Taos can be more inclusive.  
Katharine Egli**