

## **While they still can, locals speak out on drilling issues**

**Future of citizen council in question amid a mix of uncertainties**

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FARMINGTON, N.M. – As a public meeting in Farmington about drilling, land management and tribal communities came to a close Tuesday (Jan. 30), dozens of people trickled in to make their presence known and share their thoughts face-to-face, an opportunity that's become increasingly rare in the past year.

The meeting was the first convening of the Farmington Resource Advisory Council since May 2016. The council of citizens, one of 38 around the United States, is meant to meet between two and four times a year to talk directly with federal land managers and offer local perspectives on policies and projects. A June 2017 meeting scheduled for Taos was canceled because of the Department of Interior's review of national monuments.

### **Energy development**

The biggest issue of the day was the fast-tracked leasing of land for oil and gas development in the Farmington and Four Corners areas.

Extractive industries have increased oil and gas production in the region partially because of the rise of hydraulic fracturing, a process for extracting natural gas and oil that's also known as "fracking."

The Farmington District Office of the Bureau of Land Management (which is responsible for Northern New Mexico, including Taos) is undergoing a review of its "resource management plan," the document guiding all oil and gas development in that part of the state.

The agency started updating the plan in 2014 because, when it was first written, the environmental impacts of fracking weren't well-understood.

While the Farmington office was scheduled to finish the plan update within another two years, the office now intends to release a draft of the update in June because of an order from the Department of Interior directing BLM offices to hasten the turnaround time on environmental reviews, according to Farmington District Office Manager Victoria Barr.

A newsletter released by the Farmington office last week offers a glimpse at the broad strokes of the draft, including a number of options for the Greater Chaco landscape, the area surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park, that are all geared toward the continued leasing of land for oil and gas production. Roughly 9 percent of the public lands around Farmington remain unleased for energy development.

Several members of the council voiced their concern that the shortened schedule would undoubtedly shortchange the Diné communities most directly impacted by current and future development.

“It takes time to unpackage the complexity of those landscapes,” said council member Theresa Pasqual. Tribal people with “longer tenure and longer understanding” than the rotating cast of bureaucrats writing the update “are going to have to live with” the government’s decisions, she said.

“If there’s any room to put the brakes on this, now is the time,” Pasqual said.

Barr said she doesn’t think the local field office can realistically adjust the schedule given the demands from Washington, D.C.

### **Community concerns**

When it came time for public comments at the end of the day, eight people spoke out with similar concerns. As many as 50 people turned out for public comments, but only 11 signed up to speak.

“You know the landscape is looking pretty ugly. You know oil is not a solution. So why are you doing this?” asked Hazel James, a Diné community health advocate.

“Quit supporting Trump and acting like Trump... You are working for the wrong side,” she said.

Other attendees spoke about the worrying impacts to community health because of the scope of energy development in the area. Orlando Cruz, a water protector, used his allotted three minutes for a prayer song.

“We see there is a lot of heart, soul, intelligence — the whole range of human emotions — wrapped up in this landscape in Northern New Mexico,” said Michael O’Neill, the council chair. The council “will try to bring your sentiments and put them in a concise framework for the BLM,” he said.

### **Diminishing authority**

However, it’s unclear what power the council will be able to exercise going forward.

The council met without a quorum, meaning they could no take official votes. And the number of council members is shrinking. The terms ended Tuesday for two members and two spots have been vacant since early 2017.

Nominations for the vacant spots were submitted for approval in 2017, according to Barr, and were approved by the state-level BLM office, according to acting communications chief Derrick Henry. However, nominations also have to get approval from the Department of Interior and ultimately the White House.

An Interior spokesperson, Heather Swift, disputed the claim the nominations had reached the office of Secretary Ryan Zinke and said the office is ready to review and approve a new call for nominations (which must be published in the *Federal Register*).

While the Farmington council is challenged by a shortage of members, other resource advisory councils “are left atrophying in other ways,” said Greg Zimmerman, deputy director of the Center for Western Priorities, a conservation organization.

Particularly, two councils in Colorado haven’t been able to meet because those charters have not been renewed as required by federal laws, he said. Lacking a current charter is tantamount to a “de facto suspension” of councils’ authority, Zimmerman said.

While the Farmington council decided — more through loose consensus than an actual vote — to meet again at the end of June, its charter expires June 17.

Whittling away at the authority and functionality of advisory councils through nominations, charters and expedited planning fits a larger pattern of ignoring local input, Zimmerman said.

“Unless you’re a big oil and gas company with a lobbyist, you’ll have a heck of a time getting your voice heard. This administration frankly doesn’t care what people in these communities think,” he said.

Still, the community advocates at Tuesday’s meeting in Farmington are ready to use whatever venues for public involvement are left — while they’re left.

“They don’t want to see us, and they’re taking away our ways of saying no. It matters to have the meetings because you see them face to face,” Kendra Pinto, a Diné community advocate, told *The Taos News*. Land management agencies will listen, she said, “if we shout loud enough.”

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