

## Strong at Heart tackles downtown

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A recent discussion among Taos residents at the University of New Mexico-Taos over the needs and wants of downtown turned into a shouting match between differing opinions when a voice from the back of the room declared it might be time for Taos to embrace the changes ahead.

Maybe, said Francisco Velarde, a Taos millennial, it is time for residents to accept new ideas instead of holding too fast to the past.

The room fell silent.

"I think it's important that we do make (Taos) safer for the kids and more modern," said Velarde after the latest Strong at Heart meeting to decide the future of downtown. "There's no denying that we are living in a world of technology where we have the opportunity to make this community better. That's what I wanted to bring up on the positive note.

"Taos has always been somewhere where people come to visit," Velarde said. "It's going to always be a tourist attraction, a tourist town. For people to deny that, is simply denying the fact that their heritage as well were tourists at once."

Velarde had been listening to the community bicker from the back of the room and decided to give the crowd at the event a taste of what the millennial demographic in Taos is thinking.

Strong at Heart organizers have worked to bring together a diverse spectrum of ideas from a broad demographic at past meetings, and Wednesday's (March 28) meeting was no different.

Strong at Heart has been holding meetings and collecting data from the community for 10 months. The collected data are presented at meetings to show Taos residents how their opinions match up with the collective ideas of others in the area.

The March 28 meeting was held to narrow down a vision for the future of downtown Taos and see if residents agree on the data collected over the past several months. During the presentation, residents spoke up about some of their concerns of the Strong at Heart project, and officials answered many of the questions directed at the audience.

"The passion and interest are good," said Clark Anderson, executive director of Community Builders. "Of course, some people voiced frustration and that's fine too. We don't take offense – this project is not about us. We're a non-profit and our job is to help communities have these conversations about their future. They aren't always easy conversations because people care, and that's good."

Anderson facilitated the Strong at Heart audience, which hurled questions both about the project and the concerns they have for the future of Taos. Strong at Heart had been questioned by several community members in the past on whether they were reaching the entirety of the community.

The issue was brought up again during Wednesday's meeting. Many said Hispanics are largely absent from the meetings. Most of the people at the March 28 meeting were middle-aged Anglos.

Strong at Heart began in June, 2017 with a six-month target for implementation of the data they collected. While Anderson says the project is slightly behind schedule, the wrap-up is targeted for summer 2018.

"While you'd prefer to finish on time, it's more important to do a project like this right," Anderson said in an email. "As the project got rolling, we heard how important it is to meaningfully engage all parts of the community. That's taken time, and we're still working at it."

At the recent event, community members were encouraged to participate in more of Strong at Heart's data collecting by placing stickers on some of the aesthetics they would like to see in certain areas of town. From apartments to hotels, Taos-ers voted for their favorite, and least favorite, possible additions to town.

In some cases, participants took a marker and crossed out or wrote over choices they felt did not belong in Taos, such as box stores and three-to four-story buildings.

Addressing the demographic at the larger meetings, Anderson said Strong at Heart has met in smaller meetings with community members who can't make the larger gatherings. "In the last two months, Strong at Heart project partners have hosted 18 meetings, and only one of them was a large public meeting," Anderson said. "The rest were smaller community discussions that allowed us to reach a lot of people who won't come to these types of meetings."

Anderson's company, Community Builders, is a nonprofit that has partnered with the community to work on the Strong at Heart initiative. Community Builders does not receive payment from the town of Taos for holding meetings and collecting and analyzing data with Strong at Heart.

According to Anderson, Strong at Heart is funded by a mix of foundations and private sources, including the LOR Foundation, which partners with communities in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico and Wyoming.



**Taos residents weigh in on aesthetics they would like to see added to different areas of Taos through the Strong at Heart program. Strong at Heart has been working since June 2017 to build a collective plan for the future of the downtown area.**

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