

'Taos 2010' dreams revisited

In 1989, The Taos News asked residents to predict what Taos would be like 20 years into the future. Nearly three decades later, we asked them how it all turned out—and what they now hope for in the years to come.

By Harrison Blackman

The Taos News, 5/3/2018

It was 1968 when Chicago-based social worker Ron Kalorn and his wife Carol made a decision that changed the rest of their lives.

Fearful of the riots that had erupted in the Midwestern metropolis after the tumultuous 1968 Democratic National Convention, the couple decided to move to a smaller town. Ron Kalorn had studied the novels of D.H. Lawrence in college and was inspired to settle in Taos County, where the "Sons and Lovers" author had owned a ranch.

"When we came here we found it to be the opposite of the big city," Kalorn said. Only one stoplight paused traffic in town when they arrived. Soon, the couple opened up a pizza place in Taos, where they also counseled youth who roamed the streets by night and in this way continued practicing social work. After about eight years with the pizza establishment, Ron Kalorn changed careers again, selling the restaurant and becoming a property manager.

By 1989, though, Taos was also changing. The town faced a growing influx of wealthy and retired residents, which caused Taos developer Polly Raye and retired physicist Sam Gusman to believe that the town was approaching a critical juncture in its history. "Big changes are coming, they said, and local policymakers are going to be facing big, tough questions," *The Taos News* reported in 1989.

In response, *The Taos News* ran a special section called Taos 2010, which brought together interviews from a diverse set of more than 100 local stakeholders. Although the project included some of "the usual suspects" in public officials and activists, it also involved people who rarely appeared in the newspaper. During their meetings, *The Taos News* and the interviewees discussed what might lay in store for Taos' future and how to bring about desired change.

The 1989 focus groups reported a consistent set of priorities. Among the common desires of residents were the protection of resources, such as the acequia system, plus improving zoning policies and road infrastructure, promoting industrial development and establishing a full college campus.

Today, nearly 30 years have passed since the Taos 2010 publication ran, and the year 2010 has long since faded into the distance. The town issues that Taos identified in 1989, however, remain as important as ever, especially in the context of population growth and more recent stagnation.

In 1990, the town of Taos had a population of 4,065. In 2010, that number had risen to 5,716, but by 2016, the population had only risen by about 47 people, to 5,763, perhaps pointing to some larger, more intractable demographic challenges.

Today, jobs for locals that pay a living wage are still scarce in Taos while the tourism industry reigns supreme. Roads are still largely in a state of disrepair. Land prices have increased, putting pressure on full-time working residents and limiting some of Taos' treasures to the few who can afford second homes in the area.

For these reasons, *The Taos News* decided to reach out to some of the people who were interviewed in 1989. Though some have left Taos, and many have passed away, a few voices have returned to offer their perspective on where Taos has been since 1989, and where it's going.

An economy in flux

In 1989, *The Taos News* interviewed Dave Nesbit, who was then only 22-years-old. "I drive home every day, and I look out across those fields at the mountain and think, 'I'm a lucky son-of-a-bitch to live here,'" he said at the time.

Nesbit arrived in Taos as a carpenter and later started a framing business. He passed away in 2010, but *The Taos News* was able to speak with his widow, Renze.

"I feel very lucky to live here," Renze Nesbit said in 2017. "Where I'm sitting, I'm looking out at the mountain, and in that sense, it hasn't changed."

But since 1989, Taos has seen various forms of economic decline, including a 21st-century slump in the art market.

Renze Nesbit said that in 1989, "art was jumping off the shelves." Their framing business shipped artwork all across the country to various galleries. By 2016, Renze had sold the business. "Everything has its time," she said.

In both 1989 and 2017, activist David A. Fernández attributed economic changes to the loss of traditional agriculture in the area, changes that accelerated demographic shifts. A columnist for *The Taos News* since 1972, the Spanish side of Fernández's family traces its Taos-area roots to the early 17th century.

In 2017, Fernández explained that longtime Spanish-origin agricultural families had been pushed out of the region by economic pressures. "Good sustaining work was hard to come by and it still is," Fernández said. "We are seeing the straight unending continuation of impact upon the traditional ways of life. There's so much pressure being put on landowners."

Taos resident Cecilia Lucero reported a similar phenomenon back in 1989, expressing concern about changing demographics. "Now, you walk into the Plaza and there's not a brown face, not a face you know," said Lucero, then a Ca-on daycare provider.

More recently, Lucero advised that the lack of work was a huge problem. "There are no jobs here," Lucero said. "We need to find something to bring jobs to Taos."

For a time, Lucero herself moved away from Taos for work, but she eventually returned to her family's hometown. "It's the mountain—once it gets in your soul, it never lets you get away," she said.

Fernández characterized Taos' modern demographic changes as a continuation of the long story of people who have been drawn to Taos, from the prehistoric arrival of Native Americans to the Spanish conquest.

"The Taos area is obviously attracting this huge influx of people from all over," Fernández said, "from transient people to people coming with great grandiose ideas and people with a lot of money and visions of their own."

The Call of the Subaru

Barbara Paul, who taught English literature at Taos High School from 2000 to 2016, remarked in 1989 that she moved to Taos from Santa Fe because she liked the rustic Taos lifestyle.

"Barbara Paul, a waitress who moved here because Taos' simple lifestyle seemed honorable and appealing, says she'd rather have a trailer next door with two junk cars in the yard than a townhouse with a BMW in front," *Taos News* Managing Editor Bryan Welch reported at the time.

Curiously, Paul's neighborhood is now defined by a brand of car that falls somewhere between the spectrum of "junk car" and "BMW," albeit closer to the BMW side of the equation.

"We all have Subarus now. There are like five Subarus on my road," she said, adding that these cars were mostly in the same shade of blue. "I don't know what that says."

While the road she lives on has improved over the years, Paul said that many local roads needed repairs, but she didn't actually mind dirt roads. The reason? "I have a Subaru," she said.

Taos beyond 2010

Though 2010 has come and gone, the planning for Taos' future after 2010 has been long in the making. The town of Taos produced a master plan in 1999 called Vision 2020. That was followed a few years later by (Re) vision 2020. From 2000 to 2012, a roundtable, project list, infrastructure needs list, parking plan and capital improvement projects plan were all presented to the town council by various downtown groups.

The most recent effort to find out what Taosenos want in their historic downtown is called Strong at Heart. (See story this issue.) But for these particular longtime Taosenos involved in Taos 2010, what should Taos look like in 2020, 2030 and beyond?

Lucero advocated the expansion of University of New Mexico-Taos as a full-fledged college campus, while for Nesbit, the containment of sprawl was a priority.

"I would hate to see another dollar store come here," Nesbit said, referencing a recent flashpoint in Taos after a new Family Dollar location proposed for Ranchos de Taos not far from a Dollar General store stoked controversy.

For Town Council Members George "Fritz" Hahn and Darien Fernández (the son of David Fernández), bringing jobs back to Taos is of utmost importance. Although they had different ideas about how to accomplish that, they both agreed that diversifying Taos' economy would go a long way to restore demographic balance between part-time and full-time residents.

"I think it all boils down to just the fact that we continue to invest all of our efforts in one industry," Darien Fernández said, referring to tourism. "As much as it brings money to town, at the same time [it] only provides mainly low-wage jobs for the service industry, and that's causing a lot of people to move away."

“I mean I’d love to be sitting here today and talking about stuff that people haven’t been talking about for 40 years in this community,” Fernández added, lamenting that the concerns of citizens in Taos 2010 mirrored policy conclusions in successive town plans, such as Vision 2020 and the subsequent (Re) Vision 2020. “We’ve got all these reports that tell us exactly where we need to go, and we keep repeating ourselves. They all call for using our green space, building local talent and recruiting small companies that can do something other than tourism industry-related work.”

In regards to expanding beyond the tourist-centric economy, Hahn agreed.

“We don’t want to become Disneyland of the Southwest,” Hahn said, qualifying that tourism was still a vital component of the Taos economy, given the town’s dependency on the gross receipts tax derived from sales for 90 percent of its annual revenues.

Hahn also noted that retail, in general, is facing an uphill battle against e-commerce giants such as Amazon, limiting Taos’ potential for a revival in that industry. To revitalize Taos’ economy and avoid dependency on both retail and tourism, Hahn suggested that the town would need a multifaceted strategy to provide jobs, which in turn could support and maintain young families in the community.

“The reality of it is, in trying to create a program to compete, we have to look at Taos’ strengths and weaknesses,” Hahn added.

Should a more liberal administration win the New Mexico gubernatorial election in 2018, Hahn argued, it might be possible to pass legislation that could legalize recreational marijuana in the state, similar to the 2012 legislation passed in Washington and Colorado. The introduction of such cash crops as marijuana, hemp, and chia seeds could then provide a financial incentive for the revitalization of local agriculture through the acequia (ditch) system—one of Taos’ traditional strengths, given its historic role as the “Breadbasket of the Southwest.”

Darien Fernández also saw the resurgence of the acequia as necessary and desirable, which could create a way to grow conventional agricultural products for local companies, such as Taos Mountain Energy Bars.

Among Fernández’s other goals, he believed that streamlining zoning policy, establishing a regional economic development office and luring in small tech companies could help stimulate Taos’ economy. In one tantalizing vision, he predicted a downtown Plaza where a tech startup would operate an office in one of the several now-empty storefronts, its employees taking their lunch at Plaza restaurants such as Manzanita Market.

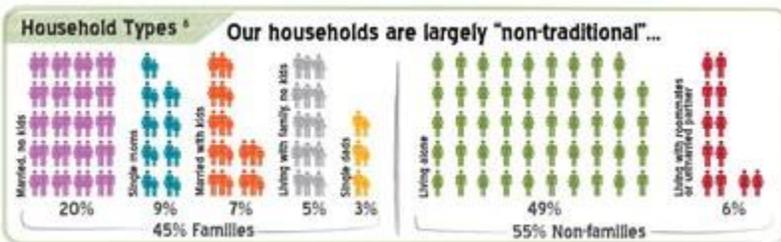
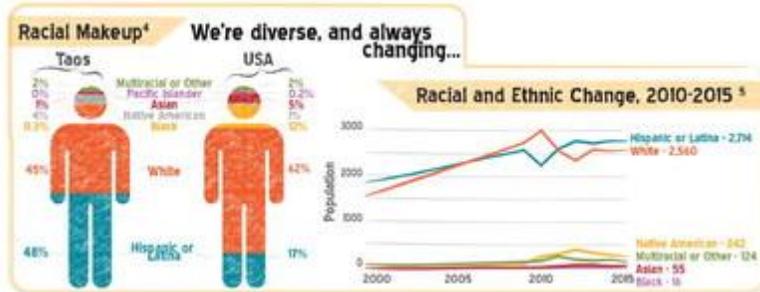
“People have seen so many other plans come through, their big question is going to be, how is this going to be different?” Fernández said. “It’s rebuilding that trust and actually getting something done. It’s about following one of our plans for once.”

The best-laid plans

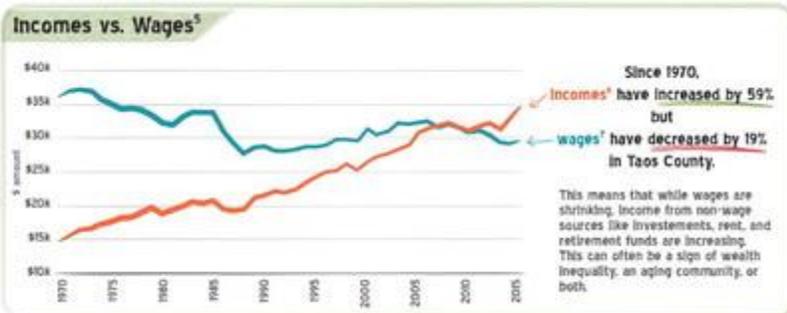
While current leaders have grand plans, Darien Fernández’s own father counseled that the best-laid plans could not always anticipate life’s twists and turns.

“It’s good people are looking ahead to plan for future circumstances, although many of them are unforeseen,” David Fernández said. “By our being a part of it, we do have the power to influence it and be involved.”

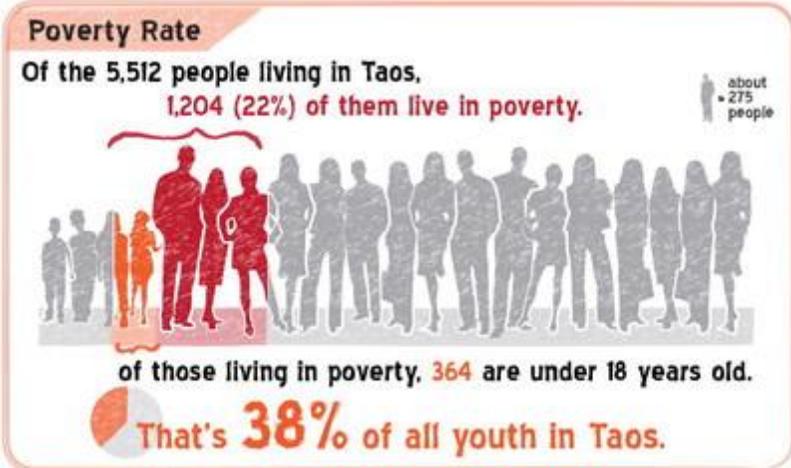
As for Ron Kalom, the man who drove into Taos in 1968 because of his appreciation for D.H. Lawrence, he said the future was no longer up to people his age. "That depends totally on the will of the people," he said. "My future is pretty much behind me."



SOURCES: 1) American Community Survey, 2015 data. 2) Headwaters Economics, 2015 data. 3) US Census Bureau 2000 and American Community Survey 2015 data. 4) American Community Survey, 2015 data. 5) US Census Bureau 2000 and American Community Survey 2005-2015 data. Annual data from 2001-2004 are not available and are not reflected in this chart. 6) American Community Survey, 2015 data.



SOURCES: 1) U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts, Washington, D.C. Table CA30. Provided by Headwaters Economics. Figures for Taos County. 2) American Community Survey (ACS), 2015 data for Taos County. 3) Headwaters Economics 2015 data for Taos County. 4) American Community Survey (ACS), 2015 data for Taos County. 5) U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Economic Accounts, Washington, D.C. Table CA30. Provided by Headwaters Economics. Figures for Taos County. 6) "Incomes" refers to annual per capita income. 7) "Wages" refers to average annual earnings per job.



SOURCES: All data from 2015 American Community Survey, provided courtesy of Headwaters Economics. 1) To learn more about eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as Food Stamps), or to see if you qualify, please visit <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snaps/eligibility>

Can we afford to live here?



Housing Affordability³

The "Affordability Gap" is the difference between median sales price and what you can afford...



	Taos Town	New Mexico	USA	Notes
Owner Renter Balance ⁴	50% Owners / 50% Renters	48% Owners / 52% Renters	44% Owners / 56% Renters	Half of all units in Taos are occupied by renters... a much higher share than state and national levels.
Median Rent ⁵	\$696	\$777	\$928	Rent in Taos is lower than in other areas...
Cost Burdened Households ⁶	45%	33%	35%	A high share of households are "cost burdened"... spending 30% or more of their income on housing. This can be an indication of low household incomes.
Vacant Units ⁷	25% (35% in Taos County)	16%	12%	Taos has a high number of vacant units. Second homes make up 53% of all vacant units in Taos (62% in the county).

SOURCES: 1) 2015 figures for Taos Town, data courtesy of Taos County Association of Realtors and Paul Romero. 2) Gross median rent, 2015 American Community Survey (ACS). 3) Household income and AMI from 2015 ACS data. Amounts that households can afford to spend on housing was calculated based on three times annual median income for each income bracket. Affordable rent calculated based on 30% median monthly income. Affordability Gap calculated using 2015 ACS data and Taos County Association of Realtors data on 2015 Median sales prices by unit type. 4-7) 2015 ACS data.

Graphics were developed as part of the Strong at Heart project