

## **Strong at Heart: Now what?**

By Jesse Moya, [jmoya@taosnews.com](mailto:jmoya@taosnews.com)

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A crowd of Taos locals hurled their fears and concerns about downtown Taos at Clark Anderson of Community Builders during the last Strong at Heart meeting in late March.

But Anderson doesn't live in the town. He's not affiliated with town government, and he can't implement the changes or fulfill the needs of the people who were shouting at him.

Anderson is a public face of the Strong at Heart community initiative led by Community Builders, a nonprofit consulting company based in Colorado. The group works with communities like Taos that are struggling to find a cohesive future.

Community Builders is one of the several sponsors of Strong at Heart who have been conducting public meetings to gather information from Taosenos about the future they want for the downtown area.

As a way for Taos to figure out what Taos wants, Strong at Heart began in 2016 after town officials traveled to Denver to experience the process Community Builders goes through to get a better snapshot for a town. Manager Rick Beilis and Mayor Dan Barrone felt it was time to take a different look at existing town planning documents, such as Vision 2020, a plan crafted in 1999.

"I felt that this was an opportunity so that we can learn how to communicate," said Barrone. "We decided this is something we could bring back to our community. I think it would be good for our community."

Strong at Heart began bringing the community together in June 2017. More than 200 people, who appeared to represent Taos' diversity, attended the first meeting at the Sagebrush Inn to list the pros and cons of their town. Despite the naysayers, Strong at Heart meetings became a venue for community members to express their frustrations, fears and concerns while collaborating with others on the town's future.

Those who wanted a new, improved Taos shared their thoughts of development while others wanted to "keep Taos, Taos" with little or no change. Controversial topics included multistory apartment complexes, box stores and revisions to streets or sidewalks.

But by the winter, the public was starting to have some concerns about who was attending.

"My impression of the project is that it has been very difficult to get Taosenos of different backgrounds/socioeconomic/ cultural demographics to show up in the same way," said Peter Rich, a member of the citizens advisory committee for Strong at Heart, "which means that input from different communities comes in different forms."

Some residents and town officials have pointed out that a majority of the attendees at the Strong at Heart meetings have been older white and affluent residents of the town. Some

were even residents from the county and not the town. An overwhelming feeling developed that the project was missing Taos' Hispanic residents.

"Typically business people, the Hispanic community, don't show up because they're busy, it's cultural or whatever," Beilis said. "One of the reasons we did Strong at Heart ... was really more about 'how do you engage the entire community?' Strong at Heart held events to gather community input both in a public setting and with more concentrated groups. Tables were set up at the Taos Rodeo, storefronts and at the annual PASEO festival to gather as much input as possible. Students and younger generations were also targeted, their input was gathered and fit into the project as well.

### **Caving in**

Due largely to the community seeing the same people at the later events, a March meeting at UNM-Taos seemed to reverse some of the progress Strong at Heart was making with community members. Several questions were fired at Anderson, who was the target of built-up frustrations.

"Ironically, the last meeting really was kind of a breakdown," Beilis said. "It really sort of caved in."

Some community members who had not yet been heavily involved in the process vocalized their displeasure with Strong at Heart and were extremely vocal about the changes they feared coming to Taos. At the March meeting, participants voted on what they wanted to see in Taos' various areas and also left anonymous comments on the provided posters.

Many showed doubt in the leadership and expressed confusion as to where Strong at Heart organizers were leading the town. The discussion turned from a planning meeting into a grilling session for Anderson and members of the community supporting Strong at Heart.

"From the start I think the intent was to provide the community with tools to build consensus, but I think that was met with a surprising level of suspicion, and there has been a lot of reluctance to run with that," said Rich.

Rich was present for the March meeting and said that he had seen doubt in the audience about the project.

Other members of the citizens advisory committee had similar feelings on the tense meeting and were left wondering if Strong at Heart was the right direction for Taos to be moving in. Cultural tensions came forth in the meeting with members of the crowd placing blame and encouraging others to leave Taos.

"There is this deep wound that nobody wants to talk about," said advisory committee member Polly Raye later, "and it's very painful."

Participants left comments on the message boards indicating their positions on several proposed changes, such as new hotels or repaved sidewalks, both strongly in favor and against.

"Leave Taos alone. Families have lived here for many years. Nothing needs to change. If you don't like the way we do things, there's the door," one comment read.

### **Moving forward**

Strong at Heart was never meant as a solution to community issues and was never meant to result in a final answer for Taos' future. Rather, Strong at Heart was set up as a way for Taos

to explore some of their similarities and differences regarding downtown and a way for “Taos to figure out what Taos is,” according to Anderson.

“Philosophically, the way we work with communities is that it’s a partnership,” Anderson said. “The responsibility lies with the community. The community needs to own it. We’re not going to turn our backs and walk away if there is a legitimate request in the community. We are committed to helping the community to see things through to success, but we can only take it so far. It’s not about us.”

Anderson now says what happens with all the data collected so far is up to the community. Taos has to decide what it wants to do with the knowledge gained from Strong at Heart, and the responsibility does not solely lie with the town of Taos, he said. While town officials maintain that Strong at Heart was a way to seek better communication, they are also aware of the division in Taos. Officials are also aware of the fears and struggles this project may cause when building a new master plan or trying to compromise on a vision for the future.

The town will be combining elements of Strong at Heart and other community planning documents, such as the Parks Master Plan, to develop a revised update to Vision 2020.

The future plan will serve as a guideline for future generations to follow when considering development and progress.

“Let’s have a downtown that is a healthy, vibrant place for our community as locals,” Anderson said.

Strong at Heart will host workshops March 14-16 for people to rate the ease and experience of walking downtown as well as some design ideas. A street party will wrap up the week Thursday (March 17).

If you go

**WHAT:** Strong at Heart workshops on walkability, design

**WHEN:** 3-6:30 p.m., Monday (May 14), walkability 4:30-6:30 p.m., May 14-16, downtown design 5:30-7:30 p.m., Thursday (May 17) Civic Plaza street party

**WHERE:** Meet at The Hub, 107 Civic Plaza Drive

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