

Planning to 'survive and thrive'

A culture of planning can cause burnout, but shared goals need people

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In the past couple of weeks, fires have flared up across the expansive landscape of Taos, Colfax and Rio Arriba counties. One fire was near Angel Fire. A Monday (April 30) blaze grew to 40 acres in the Espanola district of a neighboring national forest, and the emergency channels occasionally have calls about fields or acequias aflame despite a county burn ban.

In drought years, even the smallest hint of wildfire can make for a lot of anxiety. Last year was wet, so the land grew thick with grasses that are now dried out and ready to burn. It's an unfortunately prime setup for a fire to tear through the overstocked forests of New Mexico that haven't seen fire in decades.

In the midst of the drought, not a lot is to be done about it, other than watch the weather. That's why planning and doing work around wildfire preparedness has been on the top of Taos County's agenda over the past five or six years.

Wildfire planning is only one type of planning that's continuous throughout Taos County. Other plans for housing and economic development, for trails and the water supply and for equipment and capital improvements are also written and approved. All those plans are meant as maps for the area's sustainable and prosperous future.

But of all the plans, those dealing with wildfire have gained the most traction.

Since about 2012, several neighborhoods in the wildland-urban interface or "WUI," those areas like Pot Creek and Taos Canyon where the forests and development are tightly entwined, have taken steps to clean up extra wood around their houses, thin sections of shared forests and meet regularly to learn and network with other fire-conscious folks in the region.

The county went from having no self-organized Fire-wise communities to having seven with two more communities working their way toward certification. All the while, a core team of representatives from tribal, federal, state and local fire-related agencies meet at least four times a year to work on even bigger, more comprehensive wildfire plans.

Why it works

The county's fire planning has been several years of — to be honest — sometimes boring work. Yet with the coming fire season on everyone's minds, the value of the preparation seems obvious.

The movement is the result of the recognition that understanding, planning for and mitigating the impacts of wildfire must be paramount for the future of Taos County.

One place such wildfire planning shows up is the Taos County Comprehensive Plan, a 55-page document updated two years ago and approved by the Taos County Commission in February 2017. It's meant to be, in the dialect of planners, a "policy document" for county commissioners and the administration so that when they have to make decisions, there's an outline to work from.

Planning for wildfire is just one of several elements of the plan. Protecting agricultural land and the regional water supply, promoting economic development and more affordable housing, and beefing up transportation, infrastructure and hazard mitigation are also part of it.

Under each of these elements are goals and strategies for how to get there — work with these groups or governments, expand those services, establish this council, pursue that funding.

As Nathan Sanchez, chief planner for the county's planning department, explained to *The Taos News*, work with the WUI and wildfire is one of the most successful aspects of the Taos County's comprehensive plan thus far.

"It's the consistency in the meetings," Sanchez said of both the high-level and neighborhood organizing that's transpired throughout Taos County. Ultimately, he said, "it takes people" to make plans a reality over the long haul.

'Studied to death'

Several stories in *The Taos News* this week look at other visioning and planning efforts over the decades: Vision 2020, Taos 2010, Revision 2020 and, most recently, Strong at Heart, an initiative to gather ideas from the community about the future of downtown Taos.

The plans fit into a larger constellation of efforts that all towns, cities and governments go through. It comes out of both requirements in state law for various plans and an earnest sense of doing right by future residents.

Joni Palmer, a visiting professor in the community and regional planning department at the University of New Mexico, sees the common struggle of planning for the future across small towns. Kids leaving, stagnant wages and climate change seem to conspire so that "making it" in isolated communities in the Intermountain West is, at a minimum, difficult.

"Rural communities are struggling to figure out... how are we going to survive and thrive past these first two decades of the 20th century," said Palmer.

Take Taos County, for example. The 1990s saw strong population growth to the tune of 2.39 percent a year, according to the demographic information in the county's comprehensive plan. Yet the Great Recession around 2008 halted essentially all non-natural population growth, and estimates suggest a loss of population at a rate of about 2 percent a year over the next 12 years.

2000 was a pivotal year in the county. It was "likely the last year Taos' legacy Hispano community accounted for over half of the population of the County," the plan says. Conversely, over the last decade, the population growth rate of people "identifying as being of Mexican origin" was 170 percent; they now account for about 18 percent of the total county population.

Documents like the county's 2017 comprehensive plan fit into a larger scheme of plans. The most recent county- approved plan references no less than 20 other plans and calls for officially supporting, creating, developing or implementing them.

That's a lot of plans. And planners know it.

"People are probably feeling a little burnt out," said Gillian Joyce, principal of Rio Chiquito Research and Consulting and an author of the comprehensive plan. "There's just been a lot of planning meetings recently."

Beyond burnout, too much planning can ultimately work against one of the end goals of good planning: engaging the citizens in their government.

As UNM's Palmer said, "Some places get studied to death...and that can make community members very skeptical of the process. Something has to happen after the document has been produced."

'Extending the model'

No doubt, some of the area's planning efforts have paid off over time. According to *Taos News* archives, the first stab at introducing zoning regulations in 1979 failed miserably. "The people in the county weren't ready for it; they didn't want it," said former county commissioner Gus Fernandez, who helped lead the county in the late 1980s.

The county eventually got land use regulations, and in the coming two months county commissioners will evaluate changes proposed by the planning department, changes that could reshape how defined neighborhoods, especially those scattered just past the outskirts of the town's boundaries, can enact their own, unique zoning.

On the wildfire front, the core team of professional wildland firefighters, forestry managers and local agencies representatives still meet several times a year, filing tables and getting work done on major grants and initiatives that are ultimately in line with the comprehensive plan. The county is now trying to "extend the model," Sanchez said, by taking the largely successful blueprint of planning for fire and apply that to water supply and watershed management.

But even Sanchez admits other elements of the comprehensive plan need work. The affordable housing and economic development pieces could both use a dedicated group of people to take ownership over those goals and efforts, Sanchez explained. The plan calls for forming councils to addresses both elements; neither has been created.

The Taos County Commission is tasked with appointing an "implementation committee," a small group that would check the county's progress against its own goals. The commission has not done so in the past year, according to Sanchez. Only Commissioner Tom Blankenhorn responded to *The Taos News* ' request for comments about the usefulness of so many plans. He said revisiting the land use regulation is where the plan will really be put to use.

Local governments need citizens

Joyce, the county planning consultant, said that to make sure that plans don't "sit on a shelf," never to be thought of again, people have to hold their governments accountable in following through on collective goals.

Plans, she said, "aren't envisioned to be acted on fully by the local government. It's impossible for them to take on all of it [because] no one really has the resources they need to make the world go around."

Instead, governments need their residents to be educated and involved. They need "that next layers of engagement, really being a partner with your local government."

That can be a tall order. “When everyone has to work 40 hours a week, or work three or four jobs, and maintain the rest of their lives... and God forbid you want to have a hobby or two, or a social life... it’s the last thing you want to do.

“We have to have compassion that we’re all strapped,” Joyce said. But that doesn’t get around the reality that “citizens have to be accountable to these plans, too.”

“We co-create this,” she said.



**Terrence Quintana, Penasco, works on a crew to thin a private stretch of overstocked ponderosa pine forest in this 2017 file photo.
Katharine Egli**