

Strong at Heart drives up MainStreet

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The Taos News, 7/19/2018

As a wrap up of their Downtown Design Workshop for Taos, Colorado- based consultants Community Builders have published some ideas for the downtown district of Taos. Some are potential projects the newly established Taos Mainstreet Accelerator could work toward.

The designs are in no way a plan for the future, but after over a year of community input, Community Builders was able to sketch out some of the improvements they heard Taos community members call for through a number of Strong at Heart meetings, surveys and other public input venues. The dozens of meetings and workshops gathered Taosenos to try and build toward creating a downtown that works for tourists and locals alike. On the tail end of the Strong at Heart meetings in May, Community Builders released some sketches of the potential design ideas for downtown, and support was overwhelmingly positive for the drawings.

“The responses we’ve been getting are like 90-95 percent in favor,” said Taos community representative and Planning and Zoning Commissioner Jim Pollard. “The amount of agreement is really a surprise to me.”

The mock-ups show a current picture of a downtown spot, like the outside of the La Fonda hotel, next to a drawing of what workshop participants agreed they would want to see at the location. The drawing of the outside of La Fonda depicts what the plaza would look like with no on-street parking, replaced instead with tables, umbrellas and outdoor seating. Drawings were placed on easels for the public to view and give their thoughts.

Community members gathered for the final Downtown Design Workshop from May 14-17 and gave their thoughts on the downtown area after walking the streets and experiencing the area first hand. Strong at Heart used “Yahoo,” “meh” and “no way” emojis to gauge how participants viewed the drawings. Seldom were the “no way” emojis used. Most of the designs received positive marks with some community members leaving suggestions for how to improve them.

“The Downtown Strategy will recommend the projects and actions with the clearest and broadest support,” said Community Builders Director Clark Anderson. “If people want to see these things happen, the best thing they can do is to stay engaged and advocate for them; it’s going to take resources and political will to implement.”

The focus for the Strong at Heart process now will be to develop the Downtown Strategy to guide any of the projects approved by residents and town officials and to offer help if needed. Strong at Heart will also be compiling a list of community values that were established by participants during the public input gathering portion of the process. The values were reviewed

several times during the course of the process to make sure Community Builders understood correctly what the community said it wanted.



Though in no way a proposition, these drawings from Strong at Heart present a possible different function and look for some of the spaces in the downtown area of Taos. The ideas_

Courtesy Strong at Heart

According to Pollard, the community started tackling some of the “low hanging fruit” identified in some of the Strong at Heart meetings. Small steps like repainting crosswalks and street lines have been completed in the time since the Strong at Heart effort was started.

Challenges are on the horizon for any proposed downtown projects, as some Taosians will fight to maintain its historical and cultural feel while being directed toward the modern world. Moving forward will mean that some changes could be made in the exterior design and feel of some of the historical areas, if approved by town officials, while maintaining the Southwestern, Pueblo-style look. To assist with this, members of the Strong at Heart Citizens Advisory Committee are committed to keeping that historical feel.

“The issue is how to maintain its historical feel but also to advance into modern times,” said committee member James Dostal. “The idea of outdoor dining and better lighting certainly meets these factors. But we must be careful to keep the Southwestern flavor and not try and look like European towns. Taos is so unique and that must be maintained.”

Dostal and others in the committee are excited about the drawings and the process to get to the concepts but are firm in making sure the buildings and features still feel like Taos before they are built.

The conversation on downtown development will be continued with the Taos MainStreet Accelerator program, which will be collecting community input and working toward a MainStreet Board to possibly implement some of the ideas.

“We look at MainStreet as an action-based group,” said temporary Community Liaison Elizabeth Crittenden-Palacios.

MainStreet, a federal and state supported organization set up to revitalize downtown districts, chose Taos as a candidate to be designated as a MainStreet community. This process will include community involvement to build toward making some of the community’s ideas, like some of those in Strong at Heart, a reality. The group will focus on the four pillars of MainStreet which include economic vitality, design, promotion and organization to build a downtown district that works for the community.

According to Crittenden-Palacios, the main difference between MainStreet and other community input groups is that MainStreet will be focusing on implementing some of the plans and projects suggested, rather just adding to the list of what could be.

“We will use (Strong at Heart’s) information and direction along with other studies to look at the four pillars of Main-Street,” said Crittenden-Palacios. “We’re about looking at what’s the best use and creating the action to get it done.”

MainStreet will be having orientation sessions to gather the community together and find out who is interested in participating with the program. Sessions will be held Thursday (July 19) from 2-5 p.m. at the Kit Carson Boardroom, Wednesday (July 25) from 2-5 p.m. in the U.S. Bank Conference Room, and Thursday (July 26) from 2-5 p.m. at Coronado Hall. Though the meetings occur while many may be working, Crittenden-Palacios said there will be plenty of meetings in the future should people miss the currently planned sessions.