

My Turn

Taos County land use changes will limit public participation

The Taos News, 20 Sep 2018

By Cristy Holden

Yesterday (Sept. 4), the Taos County Commissioners held a public hearing on proposed Land Use Planning Regulations.

Article 7 and Article 9 of these new rules would restrict all public testimony to property owners. This rule would prohibit all renters in Taos County from giving oral testimony at any project hearing and create a two-tiered status of citizenship in our county: one for property owners, and a lesser status for those who rent.

One-third of Taos residents, approximately 11,000 citizens, would be disenfranchised through these provisions, a dangerous and potentially illegal precedent.

Additional testimony on any county project seeking either special permits or commercial permits would be limited to owners of property within 1,000 feet or adjacent property owners only. This would effectively prohibit comments by those concerned about water, dark skies, safety, traffic, type of business or historical considerations.

In an era of weak government accountability, the commission's efforts to restrict and exclude public input is a serious misstep. Responsible leaders encourage participation in local government and transparency in actions.

Chair Blankenhorn clearly stated his goal of limiting citizen input during this hearing. He especially does not want to hear any "emotional" testimony. Listening to citizens is a requirement of the job of commissioners. If this is a problem for the chair, he should step down.

Fortunately, Commissioners Frambro, Romero and O'Donnell listened to all who spoke in opposition to these restrictions and agreed the rights of their constituents should be heard. Members of the Upper Colonias Neighborhood Association were among those who attended to oppose these restrictions.

We are grateful to Ken Manning and others who alerted us to the potential threat to democracy contained in the proposed LURs. Without watchdogs and citizens caring enough to respond on very short notice, we would all be without full access to our county's procedural process today.

No citizen of the town of Taos or Taos County should assume your rights are protected. Some elected officials are committed to restricting your access to the process of government. If you receive a notice asking you to attend a hearing, please do so. Nothing less than our rights are at risk. Democracy requires your participation.

Holden is a Taos resident.