

EDITORIAL

Timing is right for land use code overhaul

■ **County planners will also be scheduling hearings in parts of the county in the near future.**

The term “land use code” may be a snoozer, that is, until someone wants to build something big and awful next door.

Last week, Taos County released a final draft of its new land use code after five years of meetings and work on the 222-page document. At one point it was 500 pages.

The code defines land use in all unincorporated areas within the county’s borders, and covers anything someone would want to do with their property, from operating a business at home to installing industrial wind towers. It would also eliminate the long and often expensive approval process needed to build anything but a simple home on an approved lot.

And, most importantly, the code would clarify the rules so there is less subjective decision-making when it comes to zoning. At least that’s the hope, and frankly, it would be a far better situation than what the county has now.

Currently, commissioners have the final say on zoning decisions, and there is often a lot of room for interpretation. We recognize the immense influence old friends and political allies can exert, and we wonder if those pressures haven’t played a role in past decisions.

We certainly saw that kind of shoot-from-the-hip decision- making when commissioners disregarded strong support to grant a beer and wine license to Old Martina’s Hall in Ranchos de Taos and instead sided with a powerful few who opposed it. (Sure would be nice to have another business in Ranchos generating jobs and gross receipts taxes these days, wouldn’t it?) Then, there is the lawsuit regarding Outlaw Garage, when the commission OK’d an 8,750-square-foot auto shop as a cottage industry in the Stakeout area despite an uproar from neighbors.

Besides, the commissioners are not zoning and planning experts. Relieving them of some of that responsibility is a positive step.

Some may be frustrated at the length of time that the code has taken, but the timing for its implementation couldn’t be better.

The last building boom bottomed out a few years ago, and the county would be in a better position when the next one comes around — and it will. We will need a strong code then that protects our neighborhoods from greedy soand- sos who will build anything just to make a buck and yet one that allows reasonable, controlled growth.

Praise is in order for all who worked on this project, from county planners to neighborhood associations to the Taos County Commission, which went line by line over the document last summer.

So, this is where the rest of us come in. For those who want to take a close look at the county's new land use code, the document is available online at <http://www.taosnews.com/downloads/landuseregs.pdf>. Or visit the county planning department.

County planners will also be scheduling hearings in parts of the county in the near future. This is our chance to ask questions before the commission adopts the regulations.

We hope people can get past the jargon to understand what this document may mean for their neighborhoods and community.