



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## Regional water plan finally approved

By Andy Dennison  
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After five years of public meetings, water-cooler discussions, fierce arguments and ultimate compromise, Taos has a regional water plan.

The Interstate Stream Commission gave its official blessing to the plan-ning document Wednesday (July 16) during a regular meeting convened in Taos.

Approval of the often-contentious plan means that local water-rights holders, water users and citizens have a consensus on the levels of both current and future supply and demand — and how the region might deal with the complicated world of water rights and uses.

“Taos County is unique in its cul-tural diversity,” said Town Councilor Darren Còrdova. “What comes with that, sometimes, is differences of opinion.”

Stakeholders during negotiations included town of Taos; villages of Questa, Red River and Taos Ski Valley; El Prado and El Valle water and sanita-tion districts; and Taos County. Neither Taos nor Picuris pueblos participated. In addition to providing an overview and vision, the plan’s completion makes state funding now available from the Water Trust Board to turn the plan into action, through implementation strategies.

“Water is one of the most funda-mental natural resources sustaining the communities and environment of the Taos region,” says the statement’s introduction. “The integrity of our surface and groundwater resources is inextricably interwoven with the continued health of our natural environment and the viability of our tradi-tional communities.”

The resulting document will theo-retically be used by the state engineer when deciding whether to grant an application for a water transfer or an appropriation within the region, which includes all of Taos County and a small bit of R'o Arriba County.

It also will satisfy the stream commission’s requirements for 16 regional water plans in the state, and streamline apportionment of flows along the R'o Grande for Colorado, New Mexico and Texas.

“This has been a labor of love,” said Town Planner Allen Vigil, who has been involved in the plan since state funding came through in 2003. “Mostly, it’s been an exercise in partnership and trust-building.”

## Region lagged behind others

Taos was the last region to come up with a regional water plan, in part because of contention over a required “public welfare statement.” Early drafts had a non-binding review committee placed between sellers and buyers in water-rights transfers, and included implementation strategies.

Until a mediated February meeting, the volunteer steering committee crafting the plan had bumped up against opposition from municipalities, water districts and other water-rights owners over how to enforce aspects of the plan, and the provision to create the local panel to review transfers of water rights and make non-binding recommendations to the Office of the State Engineer.

When those two concepts left the negotiating table, a stalemate over the plan disappeared.

“In other plans, the regions glossed over the public welfare statement, but they are now bumping up against it,” said commission chairman Jim Dunlap. “You took it on, and you have the best one I’ve seen.”

To direct future planning, the document takes a look at where water was and how it was used. It developed priorities from numerous public sessions that focused on water quality, protection of acequias and agriculture, upgrading of aging infrastructure, managing of growth and public education — among other issues.

The last issue essentially replaces the review committee by proposing an “office of information” at the University of New Mexico-Taos where any citizen can view proposed water-rights transfers, read pertinent documents and keep abreast of water-related issues. “Transparency was a key issue,” said Vigil just prior to the unanimous vote of the commission to approve the plan.

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