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Taos County releases draft of neighborhood zoning plans

By Matthew van Buren

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Seven Taos County neighborhoods are on their way to being zoned under the county's new growth management plan.

Charlie Deans has been working on the plan for about two years with his company, Community by Design, county representatives and various neighborhood organizations. He presented the draft to the County Commission Tuesday (Aug. 25).

The draft land-use plans classify various areas in some of Taos County's fastest-growing regions, identifying irrigated agricultural lands, rural residential areas, commercial zones and other designations and associated uses.

David Maes is a member of the Ranchos de Taos neighborhood council and helped develop the plan for Ranchos.

"We're satisfied with the process," he said. "There essentially is no zoning now."

Maes said attendees at community meetings were generally in agreement about the plans, and he only wishes the process would move faster.

Deans said the zoning aims to protect irrigated agricultural lands, and along with them the acequia systems, as well as historical settlement patterns and traditional villages. While the same framework was used for all seven neighborhoods included in the plan, Deans said many differences emerged over the course of the project.

The neighborhoods included in the draft are: Cañon, Hondo Mesa, Las Colonias West Mesa, Latir/Versylvia, Lower des Montes, Ranchos de Taos and Taos Canyon. Each includes a map laying out the various zones, a list of the plans' intents, allowed land uses in the various zones and development standards, such as minimum buildable lot areas, building placements and minimum setbacks.

For example, according to its neighborhood land use plan, residents of Ranchos de Taos want to protect historic buildings, traditional neighborhoods and natural resources, as well as encourage the "traditional plaza mixed-use model for local commercial and residential development," among other goals.

The plan lays out "district designations," including irrigated agricultural land, traditional village and commercial/ employment areas. In areas designated irrigated agricultural,

many types of businesses (such as auto repair shops, day care facilities, clinics and offices) would not be allowed, while others (such as bed and breakfasts, animal care facilities and plant nurseries) would require special use permits. In commercial/employment areas, nearly all businesses would be permitted without a public hearing.

Deans said the plans are a “growth management tool” that offer incentives for using land in the designated ways and disincentives for deviating from the zones.

Chief planner Nathan Sánchez said the plans, once adopted, will be a good change for county workers as well as residents. The draft neighborhood plans will be reviewed by county attorneys and planning staff before eventually being the subject of a public hearing before the planning commission.

About 10 members of the public, mostly with neighborhood associations that helped develop the plans, attended Tuesday’s meeting. No one spoke in opposition to the zoning plan, and neighborhood representatives said the support for the land use plans is nearly universal. Deans said the zoning would not trigger reassessments and higher taxes for residents, though Chief Appraiser Gerald Nichols said if densities and minimum lot sizes change as a result of the plans, property values could be affected.

Commissioner Nick Jaramillo said the plan will give the county an important tool to deal with controversial developments and questionable family transfers and subdivisions.

“We cannot stop growth, but we can control growth,” he said.

Deans said the draft plans will soon appear on his web site, www.communitybydesign.biz.