

## **My Turn**

### **Taking the long view of the commons**

**Gael Minton**

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I am writing to express my support of the proposed revision of the Taos County Land Use Regulations that are currently being considered by the community. The section on Irrigated Agricultural Land and Acequias is generating the most discussion and opposition in hearings, meetings and The Taos News.

The development of a new land use code for Taos County has been under way through a systematic and public process since 2007 when the county hired a professional design firm to look at future land uses on private lands approximately 38 percent of Taos County (Phase I) and to work out implementation strategies (Phase II).

In Phase II (2009-10), the 34 neighborhood associations in Taos County were offered an opportunity to work with professional planners to develop a land use code for their neighborhood. Nine associations submitted plans, seven have been approved and four neighborhood associations have an approved irrigated agricultural land use code.

This protection is for only a small percent of the county's irrigated land. The new proposed Irrigated Agricultural code is a potentially valuable improvement for protecting the historically irrigated land (approximately 18,000 acres) of 10,000-plus land and water right owners.

The Taos Pueblo Indian Water Rights Settlement Act (2010) now in its implementation phase is a victory after 40-plus years for protecting water and it is imperative that the land historically irrigated by surface water also be protected.

Of the many varieties of land use codes implemented in the U.S. there is no regulation that comprehensively deals with a full range of sustainability issues including food systems and urban agriculture.

It is well known that Taos County like other rural communities is under pressure of changes driven by growth, affluence and new technologies. Unlike many communities, Taos County has a long history of human settlement that was sustainable.

People clustered their living areas, maintained private productive lands and shared water resources, and grazing and forest lands. Life was not perfectly balanced but there were systems and constraints that protected the environment that people depended on for life.

Over the 163 years since Northern New Mexico has been part of the U.S. conditions have changed. The Planning Departments of the town of Taos and Taos County are acutely aware of the need for progressive land use regulations. They have solicited community input and must lead by proposing what they have determined is in the public interest.

This is not a matter of monetary land values or the pros and cons of conservation easements and development rights. The issue is whether Taos can move in a sustainable direction.

Biologist Garrett Hardin wrote (1968), "Education can counteract the natural tendency to do the wrong thing, but the inexorable succession of generations requires that the basis for this knowledge be constantly refreshed." We are in the process of refreshing the knowledge of how to live within the capacity of our environment. I think of land use regulations as "mutual coercion mutually agreed upon." (Hardin) We are all responsible for training ourselves to think and act for the long term. I applaud the efforts of those who are doing this work in our community.

*Gael Minton is a Acequia del Monte del Rio Chiquito commissioner, Taos Valley Acequia Association Board member, delegate to the New Mexico Acequia Association Congreso and farmer at Squash Blossom Farm in Taos since 2001.*