

## **Gridlock: Traffic a drag on Taos' rustic charm**

### **Reviving *el corazón* : Part four of a series**

**By J.R. Logan**

*The Taos News*, 9/22/2011

It's not surprising that traffic is horrendous where two highways that were once burro paths meet.

The snarl that is the intersection of Kit Carson Road (U.S. 64) and Paseo del Pueblo (State Road 68) often creates a bumper-to-bumper standstill for a mile to the north and south. And for better or worse, this exhaust-choked quagmire also happens to be at the center of Taos' tourist district.

For all of Taos' attractive strong points — breathtaking scenery, incredible history, cultural riches — traffic might be its Achilles heel.

Some locals take pride in knowing the best way to beat the jam — be it Camino de la Placita, Ranchitos Road or Blueberry Hill. But unsuspecting tourists spend plenty of time in gridlock or searching out a parking lot in what is supposed to be Taos' quaint downtown.

The Kit Carson Road/Paseo del Pueblo bottleneck is getting plenty of press.

Travel websites like TripAdvisor include multiple reviews decrying the noisy, congested downtown. "I was really looking forward to seeing Taos, but we found walking around the plaza to be more irritating than anything. It was loud, lots of traffic, stinky exhaust," reads one review from February.

The travel guide Frommers warns prospective visitors of the "stream" of cars leading into the Plaza area, especially during the height of the summer.

Traffic was mentioned in the third paragraph of a 2005 Associated Press article on visiting Taos that ran in *The Los Angeles Times*. It also came up twice in a 2009 article written by *The Denver Post* travel editor. "The increased traffic past the plaza on US 64 is so intense that the town's new tourism theme, 'Return to Sacred Places,' could include the words 'But Only After a Half-Day's Wait at the Intersection of Kit Carson Road and Paseo del Pueblo,'" the article read.

Complaints about traffic in Taos are nothing new. The New Mexico Department of Transportation has been looking into ways to fix the problem since at least as far back as 1974. But the bottleneck at the Plaza intersection — with its awkward turning lanes, narrow roadways and sometimes dysfunctional walking signals — seems to only be getting worse as traffic volumes increase.

Dump trucks and semis thunder through the tight thoroughfare and siren blasts from ambulances echo off the centuries-old adobe walls. A 2004 traffic study showed that about 12,700 vehicles went through the intersection every day. That number was expected to double by 2020.

### One-way pair

While most people — locals and tourists alike — agree that there is a problem, the trouble has been finding a consensus on a solution. First, should the design downtown be completely redone to squeeze cars through more efficiently, or should a bypass around town be built to divert highway traffic headed north or south?

A traffic study coordinated by the New Mexico Department of Transportation a few years ago looked at possible bypass options. But it showed that most traffic is coming to, rather than through, Taos; it's a destination, not a stop on the way to somewhere else. As such, there were big questions about whether it makes sense for the state to build a \$50 million bypass across Pueblo land to divert traffic headed to Tres Piedras or Questa.

The redesign puzzle at the Plaza may be even more complex. The historic district is mostly narrow roads (many dead-end streets) with historic buildings that butt up against the roadway. In some places there's almost no room for sidewalks let alone new lanes.

One idea floated during the most recent bypass study was the "one-way pair" through the center of town. Northbound vehicles would have two lanes on Paseo del Pueblo from around McDonald's to near Cid's Food Market. Southbound traffic would get two lanes on Camino de la Placita (on the west side of the Plaza).

The report stated it would be a relatively cheap way to ease traffic and would be a good chance to spruce up the downtown. But some business owners and residents were up in arms. Businesses said the design would make it hard for people to access their stores, and they insisted that funneling vehicles past their storefronts improved their sales.

Residents said it would increase traffic in neighborhoods off Camino de la Placita. Taos Pueblo residents complained that they would have to drive as far south as the Plaza just to get to the post office.

In no way was the one-way pair a new idea. Former mayor Fred Peralta made a strong push for the one-way pair back in the '90s, and he says it had long been considered before his term in office. All attempts failed. He says a handful of businesses were able to quash the project, even though the state had the money to get it done. The state now says there won't be major funding for that kind of project for at least a decade.

For all the controversy, Matt Foster, the long-range planner for the town of Taos, thinks the one-way pair might at least warrant a test period. "I think it's worth trying as a quick fix that has some potential to alleviate the traffic congestion, particularly during rush hour," Foster says.

But Foster thinks the issue boils down to a single, simple cause: We drive too much.

"Some say it's a capacity issue, that the road isn't big enough," Foster says. "But that's not the problem."

Rather than looking for a quick fix, Foster is instead approaching the problem with a three-pronged approach: Create town-wide zoning that concentrates more businesses in areas off of Paseo del Pueblo to reduce traffic congestion; require developers to create through-streets where there are now dead ends to improve accessibility; and create bike lanes so people feel safe pedaling from place to place.

In the short-term, the New Mexico Department of Transportation and the New Mexico MainStreet Program have found funding for a Nov. 7 workshop to revisit the traffic issue with a roundtable that includes public and private stakeholders.

William Hutchinson, who oversees the Context Sensitive Solutions arm of the DOT, said the workshop is aimed at finding a way to resolve traffic issues in Taos while considering the effects on businesses, citizens and cultural resources.



**A frequent occurrence: Traffic jams Paseo del Pueblo Sur in downtown Taos while pedestrians try to cross the street.**