



THE TAOS NEWS

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Town adopts plan encouraging economic development

By Matthew van Buren

The Taos News, November 4, 2010

The town of Taos has adopted an economic development plan that should allow it to lease the Convention Center's commercial kitchen to a local business.

Cooking Studio Taos, owned by Chris and Valerie Maher, is seeking a five-year agreement with the town to use the kitchen in Rio Grande and Bataan halls. The kitchen would act as an "incubator," with the business receiving abated rent over the first four years, with lease payments increasing to 100 percent by year five. The studio would use the space for production, packaging, shipping, catering and holding cooking classes.

However, when Cooking Studio Taos came before the Town Council Sept. 28, assistant attorney Jack Clough said the town did not have the legally required economic development plan in place. Community and Economic Development Director Matthew Spriggs presented such a plan to the Town Council Oct. 26, and the council unanimously approved it. It is an interim plan that will expire June 30.

"It's not the complete plan," Spriggs told the council. "I think this is a good start."

The plan suggests approaches the town may take to attract, retain, expand and incubate businesses. To attract industry to Taos, the plan suggests focusing on small, "location neutral" businesses, such as editing, technical writing, software development, medical and legal transcription and film production.

"Because Taos is isolated by having only a commuter quality airport, no rail service, and over an hour's drive to a major interstate over rural state and federal highways that wind through tight mountain curves or the Rio Grande River canyon, standard methods for business attraction are not productive," the plan states. "Business attraction for Taos instead should focus on the marketing of its quality of life, the non-basic economic environment that it seeks to build, to attract new or relocating businesses and entrepreneurs."

The plan identifies focus areas for the town to address, such as affordable housing, public safety, infrastructure and education. It states that "abundant" anecdotal evidence of the public school system's inadequacies exists and suggests the town pursue open communication with the school district's administration and board.

"The Taos Municipal School Board has been embroiled in very counterproductive politics," the plan states, "but has been willing to work with the town on the use of school property for the construction of the Eco Park, so perhaps there may be an opportunity to move forward positive collaborations that will improve our primary/ secondary education system."

The plan advocates for a formal “business retention and expansion program” rather than the “loose, disorganized and reactionary” approach it has taken up to this point. With such a plan, the town would survey local businesses and form a task force to address their needs.

According to the plan, most businesses less than five years old can benefit from incubation. It states the town and county both own “under-utilized facilities that could be leveraged to incubate new businesses,” including the town’s kitchen.

Cooking Studio Taos was also on the Oct. 26 Town Council agenda, but Spriggs said some details still have to be worked out, and the council voted to postpone the hearing until Nov. 9. Council Member Michael Silva had said he was uncomfortable with the partnership Sept. 28, but Oct. 26 he said after talking further with Spriggs about the proposal he is ready to move forward with it.

“I feel much better about it,” he said.

After the Sept. 28 Town Council hearing, Valerie Maher said the three-year-old business has been operating from the Taos County Economic Development Corporation (TCEDC) kitchen since its inception. The business has grown along with the distribution of its Caleb and Milo salsas and spreads. Maher said the TCEDC was a good “launching pad,” but the business is seeking a different space.

“We’re needing the flexibility of our own place,” she said. “It’s a big step for us.”