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Arts-and-culture district: Presentation focuses on new ideas for a Taos tradition

By Andy Dennison
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A revamped Taos Plaza. A central arts center. Walking tours. Better parking.

These would be some of the physical changes that would occur as downtown Taos develops into an “arts and culture district.”

Some of the less visible — but essential — shifts would be a “supercharged” steering committee, a stronger arts curriculum at Taos High School, taxing power and more social networking.

These suggestions and many more were on display Thursday (Nov. 5) as three days of brainstorming on the prospects of arts and culture as an economic “driver” in Taos came to an end. The district designation opens up state and federal funding sources.

“The level of skill and quality of a respected arts community attracts tourists to Taos,” said John Villani, one of a half-dozen speakers who gave the results of group discussions.

Facilitated by state arts advocates, four presenters laid out the information in the areas of cultural planning, marketing and promotion, planning and design, and financing. Each one listed strengths, weaknesses and actions for each category.

Some observations crossed over most categories. For instance, the condition of the Taos Plaza drew complaints (“It’s not an engaging area.” “Not a lively public place.”), while the vibrancy and persistence of artists in Taos got rave reviews.

Overall, the more than 100 participants concluded that some form of a centralized arts center, including youth programs, exhibition space and community arts information, will be essential as a hub for a new brand of “cultural heritage” tourists.

A steering committee appeared to be an essential part of the program, as well as continued marketing that labels Taos as an arts-and-culture destination.

Most groups asked for better cooperation among merchants, town officials, the Taos County Commission and nonprofit organizations.

“While the number of nonprofits is an asset, the dense network of nonprofits makes collaboration difficult,” said Molly Bleeker, of the University of New Mexico’s Bureau of Business and Economic Research.

In August, the Taos Town Council created the first arts-and-culture district in New Mexico outside of the federal Main Street program. Similar districts have been designated in Silver City and Las Vegas, all designed to resurrect “traditional downtowns” that have fallen on difficult economic times. The state legislature opened the way to these “market-niche” designations in 2007.

Matthew Spriggs, the town’s economic development director, has pushed for the district designation ever since he arrived in town.

A complete report on the three-day “charrette” will be issued sometime this winter. Spriggs has said that legislative money will be used to hire an arts-and-culture planner in order to begin a master planning effort.