

EDITORIAL

Looking big-box specter squarely in the eye

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Let's talk about big-box development.

That's what the town of Taos did last week when its planning director gave a presentation to Town Council about the land use development code.

Basically, William Morris says he wants to make sure the 12-year-old code still serves and protects the town's interests. Part of the current code is a cap on commercial buildings at 80,000 square feet. The town adopted the code to fend off Wal-Mart's attempt to build an 180,000-square-foot super center.

Discussion on that topic can be polarizing even on a four-member council.

Councilor Gene Sánchez is adamantly opposed to increasing the maximum square footage of commercial buildings because he says they would be a threat to Taos' character.

On the other side, in a rather unstatesman-like moment, Councilor Rudy Abeyta said those who oppose big boxes must be trust-funders rich enough to shop wherever they want.

In the middle, councilors Amy Quintana and Michael Silva agreed that updating the code is worth considering. They want residents to be involved at this early stage.

That's where we are — in the middle. We certainly don't believe that a land development code created in 1999 will forever meet the needs of this town. That would be poor planning.

We also don't want Taos to be like so many places across the nation that were unprepared when a super-sized business and its team of hotshot lawyers came to town.

Do we want more big stores in Taos? Not really. We want our local stores to thrive.

But if a big box is coming — even one at the current maximum size of 80,000 square feet — we'd like to see a much better layout than, say, the one Wal-Mart has, with its big block of a building, a massive parking lot and dying trees.

With an updated code, the town could require a more eyepleasing design.

If developers want to build a cluster of stores, we prefer they be done in a more creative design than the strip malls on the main drag. How about something on the line of the Dunn Shops with its pedestrian area and attractive storefronts?

We want outside developers to be encouraged to tear down some of Taos' deteriorating buildings for a commercial enterprise instead of using farmland or other open space.

That could go in a code.

An updated code would also give the town a say where a commercial corridor would be located.

That's a start.

Now is the perfect time to be studying the land use development code. The economy is still in the dumps. No proposals have been filed. But that will change when things turn around. We can't be naïve enough to think it won't ever happen in Taos.

Of course, an updated land use development code in town will be nearly worthless if Taos County doesn't get its act together. Otherwise we will have big boxes on either end of town, much like we see in cities and towns everywhere.

Have an opinion on updating the code and big boxes? We urge you to express it.

Contact information for town officials can be found on the facing page. We also welcome letters and "My Turns." A community group has scheduled an informational meeting Nov.

30, 6-8 p.m. at the Taos Youth and Family Center.

We also encourage the town to hold its own meetings to gauge where people in Taos want to shop and what they want those stores to look like.