

My Turn

Big box stores once again raise their lids in Taos

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The proposed Family Dollar Store to be located on the Leahy Meadow next to Overland Sheep in El Prado, and the purported development of lands in the south part of town for 'Big Box Stores' once again calls our attention to the precarious nature of land use development in Taos.

We are in danger of becoming a community that is visually and economically dominated by nontraditional land use development. The proposed Comprehensive and Growth Management Plan for Taos County and the Vision 2020 Master Plan for the Town of Taos have both designated much of our undeveloped lands to be retained as conserved open space. Many of these open spaces are scenic corridors serving as visual gateways into our community and help to define the character of Taos.

A 5- to 10-acre site that contains a 20,000 to 80,000 or larger square-foot building is non-urban in scale. It is a scale suited only to automobile access, major highway frontages, or large-scale industrial/ commercial development that Taos does not have. The scale shift between traditional architecture and the architecture of mega-sized boxes is visually jarring and it is not easy to physically assimilate this scale into a small, historically important community. These buildings with their monolithic facades, box-like massing, and bland architecture do nothing to enhance our community.

Visitors come to Taos to experience the semi-rural, open space character and charm of our historic downtown fabric. When we alter these landscapes with the imposition of large commercial architecture we become like so many other communities across the country that visitors have escaped from in search of our intimate scale and traditional hospitality. We are in eminent danger of Taos evolving into the visual chaos of 'anywhere America' as a result of unbridled strip development.

The Leahy Meadow is critical to this argument and is an excellent example of a visually important open space that helps to define our rural character. It is an important visual entrance into our community from the north with its meadow that forms a dramatic foreground to the Sangre de Christo Range. These two landscapes are wedded together. Its former owners had cherished this land for decades, as do residents today. It contains portions of the old Taos Highway; traditional grazing lands, and part of it has been designated as 'Scenic Corridor' under the proposed Land Use Settlement Intensity Pattern for Taos County. Under the proposed planning guidelines it is zoned 1-A, Irrigated Agricultural. Clearly, these designations were overlain on this land to conserve its integrity as open space, allowing for very limited, small-

scale residential development. With inappropriate commercial development pressing down on it, one solution for the conservation of this property would be to place it under a conservation easement, whereby the current owners are able to receive tax benefits and the land is held in perpetuity as open space.

Environmental impacts are often difficult to mitigate with large-scale development. The size of land parcels required means major excavation and grading work, alteration of natural drainage patterns, and the removal of existing vegetation and other natural features that define our traditional landscapes.

From an economic standpoint we know that big box stores and nationally owned commercial establishments create disenfranchisement for local businesses because they have little or no commitment to community. They increase detachment of employees and local business owners in the community as wages and profits diminish when local businesses have to compete with large, national organizations.

Investment equity disappears from the local community.

This is an issue that our community based banks should be concerned with.

Anticipated new tax revenues to the town and county from mega-developments are seldom realized or balanced out against the additional costs required for policing large impersonal properties, fire protection, and the provision of municipal services for sewer, water, waste management and other resources, especially when these resources are strained beyond planned capacities.

The volumes of traffic generated by 'big box' development means large parking areas with little or no vegetation to break up the scale of asphalt; the need for special turning lanes into and from these parking areas; additional signaling; and increased congestion at intersections. We have already seen this to be true along portions of Paseo del Pueblo Sur. Do we really want more of this type of traffic and congestion? From a visual standpoint, the sea of cars in these parking lots is what one first sees along the highway frontages. Large box stores are set back from the road frontage, a distinct difference from smaller scale, traditional development that has historically made up most of our highway frontage in Taos.

The history of landscaping for commercial development in the town and county is very poor. If this history is any indication of what might be expected from new development, landscaping will be minimal, to a level that barely satisfies municipal requirements and once installed is poorly, or not at all maintained.

Our scenic corridors and open space lands are precious and cannot be replaced once they are gone. The Director of Planning for the Town of Taos, William Morris is quoted saying, "It is inevitable that big retailers will begin to look at communities such as Taos", but many of us believe it is not inevitable that we need them, should plan for them, or have to accept them. Town Councilor Gene Sanchez has consistently had the courage to resist and vote against this form of development. Kudos to him and a few elected officials who understand what is special about Taos.

May we, and our political leaders have the courage and conviction to recognize that Taos is a special community, a small community with significant open space vistas and small-scale development? Let us not erode our special character and become filled with big box

development along our highways into Town. We are not 'anywhere America.' What we need in Taos is high quality development that is in scale with our community, is architecturally something to be proud of, and promotes local business investment. Let our vision be large, not our buildings.

Longtime resident of Taos, Bob Parker's background is in architecture, urban design, and environmental planning.