

Councilors: Keep 'big box' limit in place

By Matthew van Buren

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The Taos Town Council voted 3-0 to keep an 80,000-square-foot cap for commercial development in the town code Tuesday (Nov. 22).

The issue was raised before the council Nov. 1, when town Planning Director William Morris suggested the town revisit its Land Use Development Code, including the 80,000-square-foot limitation for commercial developments such as big box stores. The council adopted the existing cap about 12 years ago, when Wal-Mart was proposing a 180,000-square-foot Supercenter.

Morris told the council earlier this month that although no big box applications have been submitted to the town yet, it is "inevitable" that large retailers will begin looking at Taos in the coming years. He suggested the council be proactive in setting standards for when that day comes.

At the Nov. 1 meeting, Mayor Darren Córdova and several council members said they are in favor of examining updates to the code. However, Councilor Gene Sánchez said he was "suspicious" of the move and would not support raising the 80,000-square-foot cap.

On the council's agenda for Tuesday was an item allowing the council to clarify and give direction to staff to leave the 80,000-square-foot cap in place "while proceeding with a review of the development standards in the Land Use Development Code." Córdova said he had the item placed on the agenda because he wanted the council to give clear direction to staff regarding the limitation. He said he believes the issue was "blown out of proportion" after it was brought up early this month.

"I've always been opposed to corporate dominance in our community," he said. "I want to get a clear, clear indication from all the council."

Councilor Rudy Abeyta, who said Nov. 1 that Taos-ites are taking their business to Santa Fe or Albuquerque because Taos lacks options and that big box stores hold some benefits for the underprivileged, told *The Taos News* he had reconsidered his position and would be sticking with his pledge to keep the cap.

"My position is pretty firm," he said. "I do not support increasing the 80,000 (limit)."

Abeyta said he does support directing staff to re-examine other aspects of the code, however. Sánchez also said he has no problem with the town taking another look at the code as long as the 80,000-square-foot limitation remains in place. Sánchez did not attend Tuesday's meeting.

Councilor Amy Quintana said a lot was made of the Nov. 1 discussion, and she believes many were premature in getting worried about a big box coming to Taos. She said the council simply wants to revise an outdated ordinance, including clarifying what storefronts and parking arrangements might look like.

“We want to keep Taos small and charming,” she said. “We don’t ever want Taos to turn into an Espanola.”

Councilor Michael Silva agreed, saying the land use code is “a work in progress” that could use some improvements and clarification. He said he believes Sánchez “overreacted” in his response to the discussion, which was not about allowing a big box to be built in Taos.

“I never thought that that was an issue or was being put on the table,” he said.

“All-consuming” issue

Morris said with the 80,000-square-foot limitation remaining in place, his department will simply concentrate on other areas in the code, as well as updating the comprehensive plan.

“It’s going to be kind of an ongoing thing,” he said.

Morris said he intends to review individual zoning districts for consistency and to see if they are all necessary.

“Maybe we can thin it down a little bit, or consolidate,” he said. “It gets confusing ... There’s a lot of stuff that we can look at.”

He said the “hot-topic issue” of increasing the square footage allowed for commercial developments could become “all-consuming” and make it difficult for the town to look at other elements of the code.

However, former town economic development director and consultant Matthew Spriggs said Taos has the potential to become a “regional commerce center” if it becomes more welcoming to big box stores.

“I think it’s absolutely essential for the Taos economy,” he said.

He said the 80,000-squarefoot cap precludes most national chains from coming to Taos. Spriggs said it isn’t realistic for mid-level retailers to enter the market at this point, and a community like Taos needs a healthy mix of national and local retailers to maintain a vibrant economy. He said isolated spots on Paseo del Pueblo Sur, south to Chamisa Road, may be good locations to identify as a commercial corridor. Spriggs also said the town should set limitations so that large developments fit in with the rest of the community.

Candidates weigh in

Declared candidates for next year’s Town Council election have also weighed in on the issue.

Dreamcatcher Real Estate owner Pavel Lukes sent an email to the council in which he asked for a “big box” zoning designation, while Realtor Linda Knief said she doesn’t believe big box stores would be a benefit to Taos.

Andrew Gonzales, who operates Weathergard Windows and Doors in Taos, said he is “definitely not in favor” of raising the square footage cap. He said big box development would be harmful to stores like Rio Grande Ace Hardware or Randall Lumber and Hardware, which have been in Taos for generations.

“It’s bad for small business, and I am small business,” he said. “It (would) kick the door wide open.”

In an email to the mayor and council, local businesswoman and declared candidate Judi Cantu also said she is “sincerely opposed to big box stores,” which would be “detrimental to the community.”

“They turn small communities into cities that can now be called ‘Anywhere, U.S.A.’,” she wrote.

Cantu suggested the council let Taos residents vote on the issue “if you really want to do the right thing.”

An informational meeting regarding the big box issue has been organized by a group opposed to such developments. The meeting is scheduled for Nov. 30, from 6-8 p.m., at the Taos Youth and Family Center. For more information, email

tawssnm@taosnet.com or call (575) 758-9585.

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