

Editorial

The economics of a faltering tradition

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Ultimately, money talks.

And this, Taosenos, is what has led to the slow death of the acequia culture, tradition and heart of Taos. This is why the Taos of today no longer looks like the Taos of 10, 20 or 30 years ago and why without some concerted and inventive intervention, it will cease to be the Taos of old.

If you haven't already thought it through, we'll lay it out for you.

When the children of generational Taos families can't find jobs that pay a living wage in their own town or prospects for bettering their lives, they leave. That means there's no one with a heart and soul connection to the acequia on their family's land to take care of it, use the water, grow crops and keep the tradition going.

Or, when the youngest generation of Taos families decides the hard work of irrigating isn't for them when they are trying to work two jobs and raise families, they let the tradition go.

Or, because some families have only land and little cash, the only way to provide a home for their children and grandchildren is to add houses on what was once irrigated farm land.

When there's no one left to irrigate and older generations finally can't do it anymore or give up, their only logical recourse is to sell the land and the water rights that go with it for the highest price. Homes appear. Farm land disappears, and so does the need for the acequias. The irrigation ditches aren't just vital to local farmers. The periodic water flows down acequias support green belts across the valley nurturing trees, supporting wildlife and refilling underground aquifers.

When Realtors sell irrigated land in the Taos Valley and note that the water rights can be sold off at a pretty penny to help pay for the land, they are doing nothing wrong. They are being honest. They are doing their job. But, sadly, they are contributing to the erosion of acequia culture and tradition and the very thing that made Taos the amazing place it has been for generations.

When the only people who can afford anymore to buy or finance the increasingly expensive price tag on irrigated, arable farmland in the Taos Valley are those with a hefty chunk of change and little interest in irrigating, then lost is the sense of why acequias are important to the soul of a place.

But there is hope.

A handful of young farmers like Nicanor Ortega in Aroyo Hondo are taking on the challenge of farming and using the acequias. They need every bit of support and encouragement we can give them.

A movement by town of Taos officials to restore the acequia through downtown is another hopeful sign. We hope they will continue to ask for helping hands on the ground to make this effort happen. And we wonder if there's a way to create community gardens with some of the water as a way to encourage downtown residents to participate in keeping the acequia alive.

What are some other ways the acequias can be saved in the face of so many challenges?

Older farmers or people with irrigated lands who can't farm them could reach out through local grower and gardening groups, such as the Taos Valley Acequia Association, the Taos Farm and Garden Facebook page, the town and county, to find young people who want to farm and can't afford land. They can work out a lease agreement.

The National Young Farmers Coalition has worked with groups across the United States on similar agreements. USDA also has a link on its website for young farmers looking for land.

Schools or classrooms could adopt an acequia with approval by parciantes. Teachers could make working with the ditch and farmers a part of classroom curriculum for science, history, public speaking and more.

Taos Integrated School for the Arts is working on such a project with farmer Miguel Santistevan and other parciantes. Down south, the Santa Fe Girl's School has cared for and documented a piece of irrigated land along the Santa Fe River for more than a dozen years, collecting data on wildlife and water quality that is now used by federal agencies.

Finally, landowners can put a conservation easement on irrigated land through organizations such as the Taos Land Trust. They receive a tax benefit and irrigated lands along with the acequia are protected.

Interestingly, this newspaper's unscientific poll about how people view acequias show almost as many people believe acequias are thriving or reviving as those who think the ditches are dying.

Let's all work to keep the future of acequias - the heart and soul of Taos - alive.

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