

Town council approves land transfer for affordable housing

Water protesters raise concerns over test well drilled on county land

By Jesse Moya jmoya@taosnews.com

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The town of Taos council met Tuesday (Dec. 11) for a regular meeting, which lasted for several hours due to extensive public comment from members of a local water protection group.

The council also approved two land transfers for affordable housing projects: one to Habitat for Humanity and another to a New Mexico company called Ochenta Housing.

Water protectors protesting the deep test well north of Taos near the Río Grande Gorge Bridge packed the council chambers to voice their concerns over the issue in front of the town council. Though Tuesday's agenda held no mention of water wells or the controversial Abeyta Settlement regulating water for the future, the council heard over two hours of public concerns.

"We want the same as you do," Mayor Dan Barrone told the speakers. "We want good water to drink."

Dozens of water protectors told the council they were concerned about the possible dangers the well poses for the community, such as the need to treat the water with chemicals to meet drinking water standards and the impact on the underground aquifer from pumping.

Though the land where the well is being drilled by a contractor for the El Prado Water and Sanitation District is not within town limits, public comments pointed toward the Abeyta Water Settlement signed by the town as a reason for the group showing up at the meeting. The settlement was signed by the town and several other entities in the area, including Taos Pueblo, to resolve pueblo water right claims and to mitigate future water use conflicts.

"The community is very concerned and I feel that there is a state of emergency upon us right now," said activist William Johnston during the meeting. "There is a need for the community to be heard."

Following the public comment, the council went into executive session to discuss property or water right transfers.

After the session, the council held two public hearings on land related to affordable housing in Taos. One hearing was to transfer at least 15 building lots in the Chamisa Verde subdivision off Paseo De Cañon to Habitat for Humanity and the other was a transfer of land off Herdner Road to Ochenta Housing, a company based in Clayton.

Ochenta Housing will receive the land off Herdner Road under an affordable housing agreement to build 76 units.

The council also passed an amendment to an agreement with the town and the Department of Transportation regarding the lighting along Paseo del Pueblo. Under the amendment, lighting will be added to the streets as part of the DOT's makeover on the highway.

“This is something that, in Strong at Heart, was asked for,” said Barrone during the meeting. “This is great that we have been able to try to accommodate and work with the DOT to try and get additional lights that look like they fit.”

According to town manager Rick Bellis, the lights will be compliant with the “dark skies” ordinance in town but will still help illuminate the walkways along the main road through Taos.

The amendment also calls for crosswalk signals and sensors at some of the intersections along Paseo del Pueblo.