



All About Discovery!™
Cooperative Extension Service
College of Agricultural, Consumer
and Environmental Sciences

"CODE OF THE WEST"

OR

"How to Avoid Surprises and Be a Good Neighbor When You're Buying, Building, and Developing in Taos County"

A publication adapted from the Santa Fe County Board of Commissioners and revised by the Taos County Cooperative Extension Service Advisory Board.

The "Code of the West" was first chronicled by the western novelist, Zane Grey. Men and women who settled the western frontier were bound by an unwritten code of conduct. In keeping with that spirit, we offer this information to help people who have chosen to build and/or live in the unincorporated areas of Taos County.

Welcome to Taos County:

Life in the country is rich and rewarding, treasured by both Taos County residents who have been here for generations, and those who have recently moved here. It's important that new property owners and homeowners know that life in "non-urban" parts of the County is different from life in town. The County government cannot provide the same level of service that city and town governments provide. The information included in this Taos County version of "The Code of the West" is designed to help you make an educated and informed decision as you consider purchasing or developing land in the unincorporated areas of Taos County.

What kind of ACCESS is available outside of town?

The fact that you can drive to your property does not necessarily guarantee that you, your guests or an emergency service vehicle (e.g., Sheriff Deputies, an ambulance, a fire truck) can get there easily, or during all seasons. Please consider:

- Arrival/Response times for emergency services cannot be guaranteed.
- There can be problems with the legal aspects of access, especially if you have access across someone else's property. Make sure you have legal easements if you need them (i.e. deeded, not just verbal). You may want to get legal advice if you have questions regarding your own access to a County road, State or Federal highway.
- Many areas within the County are within Native American Government Tribal Lands and the access to interior areas may be across Tribal Land. Access across Native American lands requires the consent of the Tribal Government, which may not be granted or withdrawn. Respect of the Native American traditions and deference

to Pueblo sovereignty are northern New Mexico customs. You are encouraged to follow suit.

- Taos County maintains hundreds of miles of roads, but many private properties are served by private roads, which are not County maintained. Some roads that have been used for many years by the public aren't maintained by the County; that means that the County will not plow snow, grade, or repair damage resulting from natural disasters. Make sure you know what kind of maintenance is available and who pays for it.
- Many large construction vehicles cannot navigate small, narrow and primitive roads. If you plan to build, check out construction access. Private driveways should be wide and sturdy enough to support either emergency or construction vehicles in all weather conditions.
- If your driveway or private road accesses a County road, you may need a Driveway Permit. Call the Taos County Public Works Department (575) 737-6472 to find out. If your access is directly onto a State or Federal highway, you will need to check with the New Mexico Department of Transportation Office in Santa Fe about getting a Highway Access Permit.
- In some outlying areas, school bus transportation is not provided at all. Call the Administration Office of the School in which your children will be attending school to find out the school bus boarding area closest to your property.
- In extreme weather, some roads may become impassable. You may need a four-wheel drive vehicle, snow tires and/or chains, and perhaps even another mode of transportation to travel during those circumstances.
- Gravel roads generate dust. If you mind that, you may not want to be in an area which is accessible only by gravel roads, and for which no paving is planned. If you have a question about whether roads are scheduled for improvement, check with the subdivision property owners' association, or with the Taos County Public Works Department.
- Unpaved roads are not always smooth and are often slippery when they are wet. You may experience an increase in vehicle maintenance costs when you regularly travel on rural county/private roads.
- Newspaper, parcel and overnight package delivery, and U.S. Mail delivery may not always be available to rural areas. Check with the agencies that provide these services before assuming you can get delivery.
- It may be more expensive and time consuming to build a rural residence due to delivery fees and the time required for inspectors to reach your site. How About Sewer, Water, Electricity, Telephone, Cable T.V. and Natural Gas? The utilities that you may be used to having when you live in a town or city may not be available in rural areas. Please think about these situations:
- The availability of telephone communication can be delayed, particularly in the more remote areas of the County. In some areas, the only telephone service available has been a party line. It may be difficult or impossible to obtain a separate line for FAX or computer modem uses, and in some areas, cellular telephones don't operate. Check with the local telephone service provider to find out what lines and services are available to you. Call your local phone company to see if 9-11 is available in your area. If not, the phone company will provide you with a local emergency phone number.
- Physical addresses assist emergency services to locate your property. Taos County provides physical addressing for all residents within Taos County's Jurisdiction. Municipalities provide physical addressing for their jurisdiction. Establish in which jurisdiction your property lies and contact them to have an address verified or created. The Taos County Rural Addressing Coordinator can be contacted on 575-737-3839.
- If central or regional sewage treatment is available to your property, find out who provides the service, and what the costs are to hook into it, and to maintain it.
- If central or regional wastewater treatment is not available, you will be using, or have to have installed, an individual sewage disposal system (ISDS). If there is an existing individual system, have the septic tank pumped and inspected by a reliable service, and call the New Mexico Environmental Department to get information about obtaining a permit or an inspection for an ISDS (800-219-6157/505-827-2855).
- If a central treated water supply is available to your property, find out who supplies it, what the costs are to hook into it, and the monthly cost of service.
- Be sure you know what water rights are available with your property: Is there a well permit? If water is provided by a well or spring located off your property, do you have an easement allowing you to access and repair it? If you have deeded water rights (for agricultural or domestic use), listed as "acre feet" or certain "cubic second feet," find out what that really means for you. You may not be able to drill a well or have "real" access to a water supply without getting approval from the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer; you'll need to know what kind of time and expense that may entail. You may need to contact an attorney or an engineer as well as your Realtor to get this information. You may have a domestic well permit. This allows you to drill a well and use (up to a limit) water for domestic uses. It is NOT a water right.
- Not all wells are permitted to allow watering of landscaping or livestock. Before you move ahead with your

development plans, make sure that you have obtained, or are protected in the event you cannot obtain, the appropriate permits from the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer.

- Having a well permit doesn't guarantee that there will be water where you first drill for it. Consider those potential drilling and installation costs in your development.
- You may or may not own the water that runs through your property in a stream or irrigation ditch. Unless you have acquired a permit to appropriate surface water, the water can't be legally taken out of the stream or ditch. Check with your attorney/New Mexico Office of the State Engineer to make sure you have adequate, legal water rights with your property.
- The New Mexico Office of the State Engineer, NOT Taos County, issues well permits. You can apply directly to the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer in Santa Fe, or by contacting a local well driller who can complete and submit the application for you.
- Electric and natural gas service may not be available in the more remote areas of Taos County. Check with each of these service providers to make sure you have the services you want before you commit to a construction project.
- Some of your utility service lines may have to cross properties owned by other people in order for service to be extended to your property. Make sure the proper legal easements are in place to allow lines to be installed to your property.
- Electric power may not be available in single phase and three phase service configurations. If you have special power requirements, check with the service provider to ensure that those can be provided.
- The cost of electrical service usually includes both a fee to hook into the system (which may require extensive line installation if none exists), and a monthly charge for energy consumed. Check with the service provider about both costs in your area.
- Power outages can occur in outlying areas more often than in more developed areas. Not only can these disrupt your computer modem's internet connection, but you won't be able to get water from your well if your pump relies on electricity.
- Trash collection in rural areas is generally limited to two choices: A private pickup service, which charges a regular fee, or hauling your trash to the Taos County Landfill or to the closest Transfer Station. All residents that are within Taos County Jurisdiction are required to register with the Taos County Solid Waste Department. If you have questions about Landfill and Transfer Station hours and fees, call the Taos County Solid Waste Department (575-737-6336).
- Utilities may have to cross Tribal Lands to reach your property. If so, authorization may have to be granted from the Tribal Government in order to make connections. The best practice is to contact both the Tribal Government and the Utility provider to find out what if any authorizations are needed. Proper knowledge of what authorizations are needed will prevent delay in acquiring needed utilities.
- Many rural areas of the County are not wired for cable T.V.

What Can I Do On My Property?

Many issues can affect your property in addition to those concerning utilities and access. It's important to research them before purchasing land.

- Not all parcels are "legal." A parcel must have been created by County subdivision review and permit after January 1981, or have existed before then, in which case you need documents created prior to 1981 to prove this, or created by a Court action or by exemption by the Board of County Commissioners before a building permit can be issued. In some cases, parcels have been created by some other legal means allowed by New Mexico state law. If you have a parcel that is not in one of these categories, or if you don't know how to determine its status, check with the Taos County Planning Department (575-737- 6440).
- Taos County has adopted subdivision regulations the current Ordinance 2005-08 regulates all lot splits or subdivisions on properties.
- Taos County has adopted Land Use Regulations the current Ordinance 2015-02 regulates all developments on properties. Such as residential, commercial, zoning, sustainable development, multi Family Development ect. Requiring performance standards for approval such as Set Backs, Rural Addressing, Floodplain, Night Sky, Solid Waste, Wildland Urban Interface Development, Development on 20% slope or more, Fire protection, Building Permits, ect. Please contact the Taos County Planning Department prior to commencing any development.
- Other property owners may have easements that require you to allow construction of roads, power lines, water lines, sewer lines and other utilities, as well as maintenance of irrigation ditches across your land. Such easements may restrict your own development and building options. Title abstract and title insurance companies, or an attorney, can help you track this information. Many property owners do not own the mineral rights under

the surface of their land. It's important that you know what minerals may be located under your land and who owns them. Check your deed, and if you don't understand it, you may want to contact your attorney or another professional to help you. If someone else owns the minerals under your land, you should become familiar with the specific laws that govern the rights of mineral owners to extract the minerals.

- You may be provided with a plat for your property by your Realtor, or other seller. You may wish to obtain the services of a licensed New Mexico survey to ensure the accuracy of your survey.
- Fences that separate properties may or may not be on legal boundary lines. A survey of the land is the only way to confirm the location of your property lines.
- Whether you want to construct a single family home, a guest house, to subdivide, or open a store, your plans may require a Land Use Permit and/or a Fire Permit, as well as a Driveway Access Permit, an individual Sewage Disposal System Permit, a Building Permit, a Sign Permit, or may be required to meet other requirements. Check with the Taos County Land Use Department to find out what you need, and when you'll need it.
- Many subdivisions and planned developments have covenants and design guidelines that limit the use of the property. Find out if there are covenants (either ask your Realtor or check in the Taos County Clerks Department) for copies of the deed and all materials pertaining to deed restrictions and covenants. Make sure that you can live with the rules of that subdivision. Taos County does not enforce deeds restrictions and covenants.
- Homeowners and property owners' associations often are responsible for the maintenance of roads, utilities, fire codes and other common elements in subdivisions. Taos County does not enforce such private covenants. Check the subdivision's covenants to learn if an association has that responsibility; check with your Realtor (or some of your future neighbors) to learn if the association is functioning. A dysfunctional or non-existent association can cause problems for you, and even involve you in expensive litigation.
- Dues are almost always a requirement for those subdivisions that have a homeowners' association. The by-laws of the association should outline how the organization operates and how dues are set, collected and spent.
- The property that's undeveloped today may not be forever. Check the recorded plat of your subdivision to see what uses are platted within it. In addition, check in the Taos County Clerk's Office to determine if those uses may have been changed since the plat was recorded. You can also talk with the Taos County Planning Department about the process that properties currently undergo for land use change permits, and how you would be notified if changes are proposed next to you.
- You are responsible for keeping your dog on your own property. New Mexico law allows the shooting of dogs when they have killed or injured livestock or wildlife. It is the right of any owner of livestock so killed or injured by the actions of any dog to kill the dog while it is upon property controlled by the owner of the livestock. Avoid the potential for tragedy and do the neighborly thing at the same time: Keep your best friend in his own yard.
- If you want to run a business out of your home, you need to acquire a "Home Occupation Business License" from the Taos County Planning Department.

Clerk's Office

- The Taos County Clerk's Office maintains public records of all documents appropriately presented for recording in Taos County. You can record documents during regular business hours at 105 Albright Street Suite Taos, NM 87571, or submit a request for recording by mail. For further information, please visit the webpage at <http://taoscounty.org/>
- In order to record a real estate document in the Taos County Clerk's Office, the document must relate to property in Taos County, have original signature(s) and must have the Notary's original signature(s). Certified copies are acceptable for recording.
- To record a Plat, the Clerk's Office requires that the original Mylar and two (2) legible black line copies be submitted. The Plat if it is an approved subdivision plat or a subdivision exemption plat must have either County/City approval signatures from the County/City land use administrator and notarized or a Public Notice disclosure (notary not required). If the property is a condominium, there is are requirements for approvals, public notice or notarization.
- Recording fees are due at the time of recording and payment is accepted in either cash or check. For a complete list of our recording fees, please visit the Clerk's webpage at <http://taoscounty.org/> . If you require further information, contact the Taos County Clerk's Office at 575-737-6300.

Assessor's Office/Property Taxes

- As a property owner you are responsible to report your ownership of taxable property to the County Assessor (7-38-8 NMSA 1978). You cannot solely rely on your agent such as a title company to report your property to the County Assessor. Often times the address reported to us is not the true mailing address or is out of date. You are

responsible for reporting that you did not receive a Notice of Value in April or May of each year or that you did not receive a tax bill during the month of November. Making sure you receive these two important documents assures you of your timely taxpayer remedies and you will avoid having to pay back taxes in bulk which will accrue penalties and interest. If you have any valuation questions, please refer to the County Assessor's web site under Departments at <http://taoscounty.org/> or call 575-737-6300.

You Can't Mess With Mother Nature

- One potential hazard may be a wildfire. Wildland fires are a natural process. Many individuals move into picturesque landscapes in Taos County with urban expectations. Individuals may not recognize wildfire hazards or might assume that the fire department will be able to save a home if a wildfire ignites. Making a home compatible with nature can help save a home and, ultimately, your entire community during a wildfire. In addition to preparing a home and family for potential wildfires, consider working with your neighbors to prepare your entire community. When a community has taken preemptive measures to prepare homes to survive a wildfire, the fire service departments are able to focus resources on the main body of the fire instead of individual structures. One can enlist a wildland/urban interface specialist to complete a community assessment, and create a plan that identifies agreed-upon achievable solutions to be implemented. For information about hazard assessment of your area, contact your local fire department or New Mexico State Forestry Office. If you start a forest fire, you could be found legally responsible for paying the costs of putting it out. Helping to prevent the catastrophe before it happens benefits you as well as your neighbors and the forest.
- Hazardous wild land areas require additional construction, access, vegetation management and other fire protection measures. Contact the Taos County Emergency Management (575-6451) for assistance.
- Steep slopes can slide in unusually wet weather. Large rocks can also roll down steep slopes and present a great danger to people and property. Steep slopes also increase fire severity and behavior.
- Development on steep slopes of 20% or more requires a permit from the Taos County Planning Department.
- Be cautious about placing any improvements on north-facing slopes. North facing slopes or canyons rarely see direct sunlight in the winter. Snow may accumulate there and not melt throughout the winter.
- Building designs which avoid "valleys" over outside entrances, and have roof slope direction which prevent "dumps" of snow and ice accumulations on sidewalks and garage entrances will help prevent dangerous conditions and headaches during winter.
- A property owner who builds his home in a ravine finds that the water that drained through the ravine now drains through his house. The topography of the land can tell you where the water will go when rain and spring runoff from snowmelt occur.
- Taos County and the municipalities in the county are all members of the National Flood Insurance Program coordinated by FEMA. FEMA has created floodplain maps for Taos County. You may determine if your property is in a designated floodplain by contacting the Taos County Floodplain Manager (575) 737-3839. If your property is in a designated floodplain then a Floodplain Development Permit is required by the Taos County Planning Department. (575) 737-3839 and mandatory flood insurance may be applied to any federally financed structures that are in the floodplain.

Wildlife

Nature can provide you with some wonderful neighbors. However, some may be of concern to you and require extra care when you build and live in a rural or remote area.

- Some subdivisions prohibit the keeping of dogs, which may harass wildlife, or require that they be confined on the property. Some limit the number of cats you may keep, and require that they be confined, to prevent decimation of native bird populations.
- Coyotes, skunks, prairie dogs, bears, deer, raccoons, and mosquitoes (trust us) can be simply annoying, destructive or dangerous, and you need to know how to deal with them. Some developments require that "bear-proof" trash containers be used.
- Check with your Realtor, with your future neighbors, and read the covenants for the subdivision for specific information. Once again, Taos County does NOT enforce neighborhood covenants.
- Threatened and endangered species of wildlife may be present in certain areas. Check with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish office (505-476-8000) about concerns related to the area in which your property is located.
- Hunting has been part of a way of life in Taos County for centuries. Neighbors may allow legal hunting activities on their property. Informing yourself of areas where such activities are allowed may be important to you; check with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.
- Harsh weather conditions can bring unexpected herds of elk, deer, antelope, and bear onto private lands. They

may damage fences, pastures and other personal property. Checking with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish about how to address these potential problems before they occur will help both you and the wildlife.

Agriculture: Our Heritage and a Key To Our Future:

- New Mexico has an "open range" law. This means that if you live near cattle, sheep or other livestock and do not want them on your property, it is your responsibility to keep them off through lawful means.
- Agriculture is an economic contributor to Taos County. If you choose to live among and next to ranching/farming operations, you may be affected by them; you have the opportunity to help keep the ranching/farming operation viable by learning how you can be a good neighbor to this important part of our community.
- Ranchers/Farmers often work around the clock, especially during certain seasons, i.e., hay harvesting time in middle to late summer. Occasionally, adjoining agricultural/ranching operations may disturb your otherwise quiet surroundings. Those times will pass.
- If you're traveling on dirt and graveled roads adjacent to ranch/farm lands, drive slowly and with care: An excess of dust can affect both the health of the cattle and the quality of crops in the fields. Occasionally cattle may get out on the road; avoiding hitting an animal is healthy for both you and the animal.
- Residents occasionally burn their ditches to keep them clean of debris, weeds and other obstructions. This burning may bother you momentarily, but it is not a regular occurrence. Permits are required for this activity. Burning is not permitted during several months of the year due to the fire danger. Burning of trash and other materials are never permitted. Chemicals are one tool which may be used to control weeds and remove vegetation that impedes the flow of irrigation ditches, and which may be harmful to livestock.
- Ranchers/Farmers, just as all others, must operate within the constraints of public health and safety laws, which affect the use of those chemicals.
- Livestock may cause odors and noise that are objectionable to some people. If you find them annoying, you may want to find a parcel in another area of the county.
- Livestock are occasionally moved on public roads. When you encounter a livestock drive, please pull over to the side of the road and allow the drive to pass. Or, if a rider directs you to move forward, do so slowly. The delay will cost you only a few minutes. Enjoy the scene; this is the "real west," and is a critical part of your neighbors' ability to make a living.

What if I have an Acequia running through my property?

- Traditions, expectations, and obligations of property owners with Acequias.
- Acequias, or community ditches, are recognized under New Mexico law as political subdivisions of the state. Many Acequia associations have been in existence since the Spanish colonization period of the 17th and 18th centuries. Historically, they have been a principal local government unit for the distribution and use of surface water.
- Acequias have easements that date back several hundred years. According to New Mexico State Law, an Acequia has a legal easement as long as it has been used historically, since its establishment. Acequia easements exist because of historic use. No legal document is required that establishes that right. Acequias also have the right to gain access to the ditch through traditional points of access, even when that includes crossing a person's property. The easement rights include the right to make reasonable improvements and to maintenance to the Acequia. This also includes the use of machinery. If your property includes a historic Acequia you may also own the water rights associated with Acequia. Contact the respective Acequia commission and or mayadormo for more specifics about your rights and Acequia traditions.

...and a Few Final Thoughts:

- Though Taos County receives property taxes from its property owners, the amounts of taxes collected generally do not cover the costs of services provided to rural residents. In general, other revenue sources subsidize the lifestyles of those who live in the rural areas by making up the shortfall.
- Please take the time and effort to study the history of Taos County. This will give you an understanding and appreciation for the pioneers who tamed this land and, in many cases, spent a hundred years and four generations of a family completing what might be called our first "land use change." It is our hope that through this understanding, you will approach your construction and development in a thoughtful and sensitive manner, to protect our unique community, our natural resources and our historic way of life.
- The information in this Taos County version of "The Code of the West" is not exhaustive. There likely will be issues that occur to you, or that you encounter, that are not included here. If you have questions, please contact the Taos County administrative offices and they will try their best to give you the information you need.

TAOS HISTORY

The first European visitors to Taos were a small detachment of Vasquez de Coronado's expedition in search of the mythical Seven Cities of Cibola, under the command of artillery captain Hernando de Alvarado in early September of 1540. Different accounts of this expedition give various names and descriptions to what is now known as the Taos Pueblo, which still exists, its multi-storied adobe buildings still used by the Tiwa speaking people of the Taos Valley. For the more than 450 years that have now passed since that meeting, these people have somehow, in the face of constant incursions and threats, also retained most of their culture, language, and society. It has been a long journey, one that continues today midst the mad, rushing changes all around us.

Native Taoseños now also number other cultures and heritages, each with its own history and folklore, needing to be recorded and nurtured. Change is inevitable, but we should try to preserve the memories of past events and people. Traces on the land around Taos denote the passing of all these things. Churches and other historic buildings, old roads and trails, camps of explorers, battle sites, ruins of prehistoric pueblos, mining camps and old cemeteries are but a few of the sites worth studying and preserving for future generations.

This "Code" is provided by the Board of County Commissioners of the County of Taos, with the help of similar codes produced by other counties within rural parts of the country. We offer this information and these suggestions in the sincere hope that they will help you as you decide to build, develop and live in Taos County.

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