

## New senior housing complex proposed for downtown Santa Fe

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This artist's rendering shows plans for a proposed new senior housing development at the prominent downtown intersection of Old Taos Highway and Paseo de Peralta. It would be run by the operators of the existing El Castillo facility. (SOURCE: JenkinsGavin, Inc.)

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A proposal to build a senior housing development at the intersection of Paseo de Peralta and Old Taos Highway is moving on to the Planning Commission after receiving the unanimous endorsement of the Santa Fe Historic Districts Review Board, despite opposition from several area residents.

“Normally, you would go to the Planning Commission, then the review board,” said Al Jahner, CEO of El Castillo, which already operates a senior living community in downtown Santa Fe.

“We did it the other way around, because it’s very expensive to do a development plan, with all the engineering and things that need to be done. We wanted to make sure we got approval from the Historic Districts Review Board first.”

Jahner said that El Castillo will now start working on a development plan for the 68-unit senior living facility to submit to the commission. In the meantime, it will also work on putting together the financing to purchase the 2.5 acres at the northeast corner of the intersection and most recently the site of Ghost Ranch II conference center from the Presbyterian Church.

The selling price for the property at 401 Old Taos Highway is listed at \$4.2 million, according to several online sources. Jahner said the estimated cost to build the facility is \$39 million, which he says would result in about \$3.5 million in gross receipts tax revenue for the city.

Jahner added that nothing will be submitted to the Planning Commission until the state Environment Department signs off on remediation work at the site, which he said was once the location of a gasification plant that helped fuel gaslights in the downtown area.

He said lead paint and asbestos from the Ghost Ranch II buildings demolished last year were also a concern.

If everything fell perfectly in place, Jahner said the yet-to-be-named senior housing facility could open in late 2020.

### **Creating new housing**

But not everyone is happy about the plans for the facility. Opponents have spoken at both an Early Neighborhood Notification meeting last week and again at Tuesday's meeting of the Historic Districts board.

Among their objections were that the facility would bring increased pedestrian and vehicle traffic to what they say is an already a dangerous intersection and that the complex would include three-story buildings. The matter before the Historic Districts board Tuesday night was a request for a height exception to build a 36-foot tall structure on property where the maximum allowable height is 23 feet, 10 inches.

One elderly woman who used to live at El Castillo but 10 years ago moved into the Plaza del Monte retirement community, which would share a driveway with the proposed facility, said the development will attract "wealthy newcomers" who are strangers to the community.

Jahner said that's not true. He said about 85 percent of residents at El Castillo are from Santa Fe and the immediate area.

"We think this is an extremely good project for the city of Santa Fe," he said. "We're bringing in a lot of seniors to the downtown area, not only for the events and things that go on in the city, but also to the businesses downtown."

The written proposal emphasized that point, while also saying the new facility would help meet Santa Fe's housing shortage.

"Downtown residential development is a balance between fulfilling housing needs within the limitations of smaller parcels, while accommodating the required parking. The proposed design accomplishes this in a sensitive, historically harmonious manner," reads a memo from the developers included in the Historic Districts board's meeting packet. "The character of the historic districts is not limited to buildings; it is about people and people living downtown. The vibrancy and economic vitality of the downtown is greatly enhanced through the creation of new housing opportunities."

An important feature of the proposed facility is a 160-space, nearly 60,000-square-foot underground parking garage. Surface parking would present unacceptable security and accessibility problems, and wouldn't be in keeping with the city's objective to promote its historic integrity, the applicants say.

### **A fit with SF style**

Tuesday was the third time the proposal was presented to the Historic Districts Review Board, sometimes called the H-Board, by the project management firm JenkinsGavan, Inc.

Several modifications to the design have been made during the process, including downsizing from the originally planned 73 units to 68 units, with units ranging in size from 900 to 1,300 square feet, Jahner said. Some of the three-story structures were moved farther away from the streets and closer to the center of the complex to be further from the streetscape.

More than 2,100 square feet of open space was added. A driveway off Old Taos Highway was moved farther away from the intersection with Paseo de Peralta to lessen congestion. And yard walls facing those streets were lowered to increase visibility.

The building would be designed to fit "Recent Santa Fe Style," with vigas, beams and traditional wood corbels. Walls would be covered with buckskin colored stucco, windows, door cladding and fencing would be colored "medium bronze," and stain and wood elements would be done in "Danish walnut."

The complex will include three separate outdoor courtyards, a lobby and communal spaces, a multipurpose room, a fitness and wellness room, and offices.

In asking for the height exception to build up to 36 feet, the applicants argued that the planned buildings were in keeping with two buildings located across Paseo de Peralta.

But the 35-foot-8-inch Federal Building housing the post office and the 57-foot historic Federal Courthouse, as federal government-owned buildings, are not subject to the city's height restrictions. And the Scottish Rite Temple

next door to the site of the proposed facility, constructed before the city had building height restrictions, stands at more than 40 feet, with its tower measuring 67 feet, 4 inches tall.

Jahner said three stories were necessary to make the project financially feasible based on debt service ratios.

“To make a long story short, we’re a nonprofit,” he said of El Castillo. “We don’t have much of a profit margin.”

### **Keeping the trees**

An existing approximately 50-foot sequoia tree located on the property is also sketched into the design, but in an artist’s rendering of the complex, it’s not located where it is today.

A letter from JenkinsGavin to the city’s Historic Preservation Division says the tree would be moved to the southwest corner of the property “to allow pedestrians to enjoy the landmark tree of the previous Ghost Ranch property.”



This 50-foot-tall sequoia tree, one of about two dozen sequoias in Santa Fe, would be moved to another spot on the same lot where it now stands as part of plans for new senior housing development at Old Taos Highway and Paseo de Peralta. (T.S. Last/For Journal North)

Jahner said it would cost approximately \$170,000 to move the sequoia and four other trees, at least two of them ponderosa pines, to other spots on the property. He said a representative from a company out of Houston specializing in moving full-grown trees has visited the site. While there’s no guarantee the sequoia would survive the transplant, he was told there’s a close to 95 percent chance of success.

“We realized that it’s a unique tree and my board agreed to spend money to move it and some other trees to a place they could remain for the rest of their existence,” he said.

Richard Thompson, the city’s parks director, said there are about 25 redwood trees, including sequoias, in Santa Fe. Most of them surround the Roundhouse and one is used as the state Christmas tree.

“It’s an unusual tree for this area, but it proves the point that with a little science and a little faith you can grow something just about anywhere,” he said.

Thompson said his best guess is that the sequoia near the intersection of Paseo de Peralta and Old Taos Highway is between 80 and 100 years old.

It's unclear how the tree got there, but there is speculation it may be tied to Georgia O'Keeffe, who before moving to Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu lived at a home on Canyon Road where another sequoia stands.

However it got there, Jahner said the tree pays homage to the history of the property and would serve as an elegant showpiece for the senior housing facility.

"If we put it in a place to make it more prominent, it would make it so other people can enjoy it too," he said.

**Contact the writer.**

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