

Land trusts protect Llano's hot springs from development

By Andy Dennison

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The Taos Land Trust finally has found a steward for the historic Ponce de León Hot Springs: Another land trust.

Following three years of discussions — and a fortuitous change in state law — the local land trust has signed up the Santa Fe Conservation Trust to enforce a no-development conservation easement on the 45-acre property above Llano Quemado.

“This has gone through all kinds of incarnations, but we hope now that this agreement will keep this place as a beautiful, quiet preserve,” said Ernie Atencio, director of the Taos Land Trust, noting that the title abstract for the property contains 150 pages.

The action bars any type of development, including subdivisions or geothermal use, on the land that contains fluoride-concentrated, 95-degree groundwater in pools and ditches. Activities will be restricted to non-motorized, low-impact recreation, said Atencio.

A new state law permitted nonprofit land trusts to create easements themselves, but only if its enforced by another trust other than the land-owning group. Through an anonymous donation, the Taos Land Trust purchased the hot springs property from private owners in 1997 for \$500,000, amid rumors of development.

As part of the deal, the Taos Pueblo will continue to have access for ceremonies and, because of that, the public will not be allowed to soak in a main pool. A caretaker will remain in the house on the land, per the agreement. A plan for public access is still in the works, Atencio said, as are proposals to create educational programs on the site.

Even if the land is transferred to another entity, the restrictions of the conservation easement remain. Over the years, the property has attracted all manner of people to pray, soak, swim, party — even wash clothes. The springs were a popular resting spot along El Camino Real de Adentro and a community gathering spot throughout the centuries.

Like many old parcels in Taos, ownership has flowed through aboriginal claims to Spanish land grants to private purchase.