

'Symbolic' pact affirms Pueblo pilgrimage access

By Andy Dennison
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Taos Land Trust and Taos Pueblo have signed a landmark agreement that gives the tribe a permanent right of way for a portion of its annual red clay-gathering pilgrimage.

The two parties created a "cultural and traditional access easement" so that tribal members can cross the 22-acre Valdez/Rfo Hondo Park owned by the Taos Land Trust, on their way to red clay deposits to the north.

"While the park already has public access, we wanted to do something with a really different kind of use,"

said Ernie Atencio, the land trust's director. "The agreement integrates traditional and natural landscapes that we're trying to protect."

Taos Pueblo War Chief Bernard Lujan was not available for comment on the agreement.

Discussions began last spring when the land trust and tribal leaders were negotiating access to the Ponce de León Hot Springs in Llano Quemado.

"Pueblo leaders realized that we had this land (in Valdez), and they were motivated to create an agreement," said Atencio. "The actual negotiations took a week."

Land trust board president

Crestina Trujillo-Armstrong said the agreement was a "gesture of goodwill," especially since some of land along the route between Taos Pueblo and the red clay site belongs to newcomers to the area.

"It was more symbolic since they already have access across our land," said Trujillo-Armstrong. "We hope it will be a model for other landowners along their route."

The land trust hopes to sit down with the current Pueblo administration before it changes in January to map out a portion of the route and then contact landowners in hopes of them granting access, too. Atencio said the trust knows some of the

landowners already, and several have conservation easements through Taos Land Trust.

"Their traditions are who they are and who we are," said Trujillo-Armstrong, referring to lifelong residents of Taos County. "The newer people don't necessarily understand those traditions, and some have problems with the tribe crossing their lands."

Property owners are not required to give public access to their lands under conservation easements, but some grant rights of way for such uses as access to National Forest land, or for recreational or educational purposes, according to Atencio.