

# Pueblo in line for Llano hot springs



By Andy Dennison

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Childhood memories clash with economic realities over the possible transfer of the Ponce de Leon hot springs to Taos Pueblo appears close.

Although late to the discussion, locals who grew up using the hot springs have raised questions about the transfer, and Taos County commissioners say they are ready to step in if the pueblo can't do it.

Taos Land Trust, which owns the 45-acre parcel above Llano Quemado, has been negotiating with Taos Pueblo officials for two years in an effort to find a proper steward for the land. Complicating any deal is the original donor's desire to provide public access and a conservation easement that eliminates development dominate the conditions of the transfer.

"It's complicated," said Ernie Atencio, executive director of the Taos Land Trust. "We have to find someone who can manage public access, but this is a place that is important to many people. And, they all have a different vision for it."

Over the years, the fluoride-concentrated, 95-degree groundwater pools have attracted all manner of people to pray, soak, swim, party — even wash clothes. The springs were a popular resting spot along the Camino Real 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.

Public access has been variable, Atencio said, depending upon ownership and vigilance. Many of the adult generation in Taos remember the hippie days of the 1960s and '70s — some quite fondly.

Since the land trust purchase the land in 1997, a number of proposals have come forth. Entrepreneurs have approached the land trust to develop the land into a spa, Atencio said, a proposal that was rejected. The Weimer Family Trust, which owns 5,000 acres in Miranda Canyon above the springs, once eyed the property as a park. Both Picuris and Taos pueblos say they have used the land for ceremonial purposes.

Further complicating issues is the Ponce de Leon Acequia that originates in the hot springs and irrigates a number of parcels in Llano Quemado.

Many suitors, no commitments

At different times, the trust has talked unsuccessfully with the town, the county, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and state and federal park officials.

“This is something we’ve hashed over and over again,” said trust board president Christina Trujillo-Armstrong.

In an unusual move, the land trust purchased the sage-and-piñon covered parcel with an anonymous donation of \$500,000 a decade ago. The donor stipulated that the springs be accessible to the public, Atencio said, and the trust attached a conservation easement to stop any development.

“We wanted to find the best possible steward of the land,” he said, noting that the trust owns very few of the properties it holds in trust. “And we believe the tribe (Taos Pueblo) would be an exceptional steward.”

At a recent meeting in Llano Quemado, residents raised concerns about the pueblo’s desire to keep the property accessible in the future.

“I can see some restrictions like with Blue Lake (another pueblo acquisition),” said Francisco Gonzales at the commissioners’ meeting Tuesday (Dec. 4). “You should be leaders for your community, not sit back and let it happen.”

Ian Chisholm, secretary to the Taos Pueblo War Chief, told The Taos News Wednesday (Dec. 5) that the tribal negotiators are “amenable” to the restrictions required by the land trust, including public access and a perpetual conservation easement.

Atencio believes that the pueblo will do the right thing, if negotiations are settled: “The board feels good about the prospect of transferring to the pueblo. They will honor the spirit of the donor and our mission of land conservation and stewardship.”

With the holidays coming, Atencio expects the negotiations to be suspended until late January. The land trust isn’t asking for money — perhaps the \$40,000 it spent to manage the property over 10 years — but for alignment with its conservation and access conditions.