

Land Trust helps to create park in Taos

By Matthew van Buren

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The Taos Land Trust has completed a new 10-acre conservation easement—a public park near Valverde Commons.

The 10-acre Sunset Park expands on a previous three-acre park; the acreage was deeded to a nonprofit of the same name, according to information from the Land Trust. Executive Director Ernie Atencio said the paperwork had been in process since March 2010, but the work was recently completed with the cooperation of three landowners: Kristina Wilson, Chaz Harrison and Valverde Commons. Valverde Commons contributed four acres, Harrison 3.26 acres and Wilson 2.8 acres, according to information from the Land Trust.

“We had discussed this idea with the landowners two to three years ago,” Atencio said. “They were dedicated to doing that.”

He said Wilson “has been a proponent of open-space parks all her life.”

“This is a very exciting thing for the community,” she is quoted as saying in a Taos Land Trust release. “It’s a beautiful place for people to walk and relax, enjoy the views, enjoy sunsets on the mountain. As Taos keeps growing, people will be very happy years from now that this park was set aside in the middle of town.”

Land Trust Conservation Director Tanya Duncan said no buildings are allowed on the property except for a small storage shed and a couple of small shade structures. Benches and picnic tables will be placed at the park for public use, and it may also include a play structure. Public parking is also available off Valverde Street.

Agricultural water rights for the acreage can never be sold or separated from the property, and acequia access will be permanently protected. Future community gardens may be grown using the water rights, according to the Land Trust.

Conservation easements placed on natural or agricultural lands prevent future development from affecting them, and landowners who agree to create conservation easements can receive tax credits from the state and federal governments.

Atencio said it is important for the state to have a stringent application process, as when Colorado started a similar program it went “haywire” with little oversight, allowing “bogus appraisals and sham

land trusts.” However, he said the Taos Land Trust has been seeking changes to the system in New Mexico.

“It’s a complicated and convoluted application process,” he said. “In some cases, maybe it seems like they went overboard.”

Atencio said the system in New Mexico still contains some of the best incentives anywhere, but the “complicated and time-consuming process,” which includes applications, public hearings and review by two state agencies, may deter some landowners from creating conservation easements. He said some parts are working while others could stand to change.

He also said many applications are “in limbo” under the state’s new administration, which he said is off to a “slow start” in terms of conservation easements.

“Maybe this is just the nature of a new administration trying to get its feet on the ground,” Atencio said. “We’re not sure when that’s going to budge.”

Taos Land Trust’s board of directors passed a resolution earlier this year and sent it to Gov. Susana Martinez. The resolution urges her to implement the New Mexico Land Conservation Incentives Act “in an efficient and equitable manner that acts as a true incentive to landowners and serves the public interest” and to “do everything in her power to ensure that (the Act) remains in place and functions well for the benefit of the citizens of New Mexico.”

To learn more about the Taos Land Trust or creating a conservation easement, visit taoslandtrust.org or call (575) 751-3138.

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