

River Trail Inches toward Reality through City, County

Staci Matlock | The New Mexican⁹

Barrio La Cañada resident Keaton Johnson has wanted a bikeable trail through the city along the Santa Fe River for more than two decades, ever since a truck nailed him while he was biking a city street.

His wish is slowly coming true.

City and county planners and elected officials hope one day the Santa Fe River Trail will traverse through Santa Fe's historic heart some 13 miles from Patrick Smith Park to N.M. 599 and perhaps all the way to the wastewater-treatment plant. The city's portion ends at Frenchy's Field, where the county will take over planning and construction.

Park planners envision one day a long Parque del Rio with benches, water fountains and shady cottonwoods along the trail. It will become one of three major hike-bike trails the city is developing through Santa Fe, along with the Rail Trail and Arroyo Chamiso Trail.

"I am glad they are finally bringing this to fruition," said Johnson, 69, who likes to walk along the river. "I wanted people to have access besides West Alameda."

The city's portion of the river trail will be 8 to 10 feet wide in most places. It will be a hard surface such as concrete, suitable for biking, running and hiking. The county's portions will be wider to accommodate horseback riders as well.

For years, people have walked along the river through the city, creating a well-worn dirt path. The official Santa Fe River Trail will meander along some of the same oft-trodden route. Both the city and the county have had to buy easements from private property owners.

A long time coming

The dream of a trail running the length of the Santa Fe River from Santa Fe's east side to the wastewater-treatment plant began years ago, based on the River Walk in San Antonio, Texas. Over the years, the river trail idea kept cropping up and inching toward reality, kind of like the idea of allowing water to flow more regularly down the river.

As a member of the Barrio La Cañada river committee, Johnson first walked along the proposed trail with Patti Bushee, now a city councilor, about 18 years ago. "There wasn't the will in the city to make it happen back then," said Johnson, who has lived in the neighborhood for 25 years.

In 1995, the Santa Fe River Commission worked with a Boulder, Colo., consultant to create a master plan for the river corridor. In the late 1990s, the City Council approved funds to improve the river walk from near the Plaza to St. Francis Drive. A decade later, the last pieces of the trail are finally coming together.

Trail in the city

The city is taking bids now for the next phase of the Santa Fe River Trail, which will run about three-quarters of a mile from the artsy metal bridge at Camino Alire to Griego Park, right past Johnson's backyard fence.

It is the stretch of the river trail closest to houses. It will require a lot of work to clear out thick brush and shore up the narrow riverbank.

The city negotiated easements with the property owners, which took several months. "I was the first one to sign an agreement," Johnson said.

A few neighbors, even those who support the trail, are worried the trail will increase vandalism and break-ins. Johnson and a few others have had their houses broken into over the years.

Rachel Friedman, the city's river coordinator, said studies show public trails don't increase vandalism or crime and in some cases have reduced incidents of both. A safety fact sheet included as part of the master plan contains studies dating back at least a decade. The most recent one, a 1998 Rails to Trails Conservancy study, looked at 372 trails covering 7,000 miles across the country and used by 45 million people. One-fourth of the managers reported some littering and vandalism, but no harm to nearby private properties; the rest reported no problems.

Olivia Roybal, who lives next to the planned Santa Fe River Trail, said she would rather have a developed trail than the weeds and massive Chinese elms there now. She figures if someone is going to break into her house, it will happen whether the trail is there or not. "I think the trail will make the neighborhood a little nicer," Roybal said.

Robert Lopas, just down the street from Roybal, said getting rid of the elms will make him happy. The elm roots are already growing under his concrete wall, lifting and cracking it. He sometimes hears people walk by right next to his back wall on the existing dirt trail. "This I don't like. I don't want people looking over my fence," said Lopas, who has lived in the neighborhood since the 1960s. "I hope they build the trail closer to the river."

Funding the trail

The Camino Alire to Frenchy's Field stretch of the trail will cost about \$4 million for trail construction and river restoration. The funds are coming from a voter-approved parks bond, gross-receipts taxes and legislative appropriations. That stretch of the trail will include a pedestrian bridge at Ricardo Road. A footbridge will be constructed at Griego Park across the river as well, if there's enough money, Friedman said.

Upstream from Camino Alire, about \$1.4 million in bond money will be used to refurbish park benches, upgrade water fountains, plant trees and build shade structures.

On the city's parks bond master plan, the trail starts officially at Patrick Smith Park, although it is just a dirt path. But the city is going out for bids to improve the trail down to Delgado Street, where a concrete sidewalk begins. The sidewalk now runs all the way past St. Francis Drive, through Bicentennial Park to Camino Alire. "We want to make it a continuous walkway along Alameda," Friedman said.

Concurrent with building the trail, the city is working to stabilize the riverbank, remove non-native trees and plant native vegetation. Over the years, heavy sporadic river flows have created a deep channel in stretches of the river, such as the reach near Barrio La Cañada. The riverbanks have to be stabilized so the river trail doesn't crumble into the channel.

City contractors, including YouthWorks and WildEarth Guardians, have done work to reduce the channeling by building water harvesting ponds and infiltration galleries to slow down the flows.

But in some stretches, "the incision is so deep, it will take heavy equipment to stabilize that area," Friedman said.

The river restoration was designed by local ecologists such as Rich Schrader of River Source, and Bill Zeedyk and Steve Vrooman of Restoration Ecology.

Trail in the county

The county is slowly piecing its portion of the river trail together and working to restore the river.

It is still working to buy easements along the 6.5 miles of trail from Frenchy's Field to N.M. 599, according to Colleen Baker, Santa Fe County's open space and trails program manager. The county has acquired easements to a little more than two miles thus far. The Trust for Public Land is helping the county talk to property owners. "We work with willing landowners," Baker said.

The next section the county will work on runs along the river from Camino Carlos Real to San Ysidro Court, off Siler Road. The county acquired almost 11 acres of land in the stretch from the Trust for Public Land for \$50,196.

The San Ysidro Crossing and park near the historic Agua Fria village is the county's shining example of what Baker hopes will happen along other stretches of the trail. Volunteers have planted hundreds of native trees and shrubs in the last three years. "The most positive comments about San Ysidro came from longtime residents," Baker said. "In their childhood, they had walked along the river. As adults, it had become a gravel pit and a big, dry arroyo."

Off-road vehicle enthusiasts were damaging the riverbanks; the county installed a fence to discourage access, she said.

Just east of N.M. 599 is another one-mile river restoration project on state land that has involved federal, state, city, county and youth partners. More than 600 students over the years have helped recreate a bosque along the river that will one day be part of the larger trail.

The county estimates it will cost about \$1.5 million a mile for the river restoration and about \$1.2 million a mile to acquire easements, Baker said. Trail construction is estimated to cost almost \$1.5 million, with most of the money for five pedestrian bridges.

The money is coming from gross-receipts taxes, federal grants and a \$3.5 million taxpayer approved bond.

Baker said the biggest challenges to finishing the county's portion of the trail are the time it takes to track down property owners and negotiate easements. "There's a lot of small lots and a lot of heirs," Baker said.