

# Pathfinder: Trail builder hopes city will invest in repairs



Mike Wirtz was the man hired to design and build the Dale Ball Trails in 2000. Now, Wirtz hopes that city crews will maintain the trails — which time, traffic, and torrential downpours have left in disrepair. Courtesy photo

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For The New Mexican | [0 comments](#)

By now, just about everyone in Santa Fe, from the average day hiker to the avid mountain biker, knows Dale Ball's story. Back in 2000, Ball — a retired banker and trails enthusiast — cobbled together a patchwork of easements spanning more than 1,150 acres of city, county and private land in the foothills of Santa Fe and devoted it to a system of public trails.

Fewer people, however, know about Mike Wirtz, the man hired to design and build the outdoor opus that now bears Ball's name.

A former wildlife management expert with the U.S. Forest Service, Wirtz learned how to build and maintain trails while saddled with the arduous task of repairing recreational trails impacted by the biannual migration of cattle that graze the Pecos Wilderness.

Now in his early 70s, Wirtz recalled creating the Dale Ball Trails, much in the same way Bob Ross used to talk about painting “happy little trees” on PBS.

“We put in some beautiful swooping switchbacks right here,” he said, drawing his finger along a map of the elegant 30-mile trail system that he and roughly 50 volunteers created over five years. “And over here, the trail moves like a squiggly snake. This stretch has great trail flow!” Wirtz said.

Eight years after completion, untold thousands of hikers, bikers and trail runners share his enthusiasm for the trails each year. But Wirtz said time, traffic and torrential downpours have left many sections of the trails in disrepair — particularly in the steeper, more remote sections that maintenance crews rarely visit.

“The biggest problem I see now is that the city isn’t keeping up its end of the bargain,” he said. “When the city crews do show up, they maintain a quarter-mile from the trailhead in either direction.”

Wirtz and other trail enthusiasts in the community hope city crews will reach farther into the Dale Ball network — as far as three miles from the trailheads — where the more serious work needs to happen. Wirtz pointed to several places on the map where he said the wear and tear is the worst — mostly south of Cerro Gordo Road. Then, pointing north, he indicated one section where an aggrieved private-land owner rerouted the trail some 40 feet off its original course to keep people farther from his land.

“As a result, the place he put the trail is eroding. It looks like hell,” Wirtz said. “It’s too steep and it’s channeling the water.”

Considering the explosion in popularity of the trails, the hope is that everyone — the city, the county and the many local devotees who use the trails every week — will give back.

*Lucas Conley is a supporter of the Santa Fe Conservation Trust.*