

Volunteers give popular trail a safer, more elegant start

There wasn't much fanfare late last October when volunteers finished rerouting a portion of the Dale Ball Trail off Upper Canyon Road.

Only a dozen or so people were on hand to celebrate the completion of the four-day project. But many hikers and bikers setting off for Picacho Peak and beyond are benefiting from the improvements.

Now, instead of the steep climb up a badly eroded power easement, they can easily hop onto a gently graded trail through the trees that crosses the historic Acequia del Llano — an active irrigation ditch — and meets up with the existing Dale Ball Trail after about a quarter-mile.

The project was initiated by Bob Findling, director of land protection and stewardship of The Nature Conservancy, who supplied about 12 cubic yards of rock for the job. The trail, on conservancy land, was built by volunteers from the Santa Fe Conservation Trust, the Trails Alliance of Santa Fe and the Santa Fe Fat Tire Society, a mountain biking group.

The total cost of the project was about \$500 for the rocks.

Tim Rogers, trails program manager for the Santa Fe Conservation Trust and a crew leader, posted photos and reported on the workdays at www.sfct.org/trails.

Many of the volunteers have received special training in trail building from the International Mountain Bicycling Association, the Forest Service and other organizations, said Margaret Alexander, one of the volunteers from the Trails Alliance.

It's hard work, but "we don't strain ourselves. We try to have a nice time," she said. And "once in a while, a big, young, strong guy comes to haul some rocks."

Alexander said they changed the route several times in an effort to get it just right. Because the soil in many places was soft, due to the acequia, they needed rock of various sizes to build it.

"Over the years, we've learned a lot about successful and unsuccessful trail building," Alexander said. "We try to make the trails as aesthetically pleasing as we can."

They also try to build in gentle curves and make the trails sustainable, she added.

The Nature Conservancy is among the groups proposing another new trail segment in the same area that would make it safer for those hiking or biking the Dale Ball Trails to the north of the parking lot on Cerro Gordo Road.

The new trail would be on city-owned land acquired from Public Service Company of New Mexico as part of the 1995 purchase of the Sangre de Cristo Water Co.

Some trespassers already have created a volunteer trail from the Cerro Gordo parking lot. The path passes by an underground pump vault and a weather monitoring station and between an old sand filtration plant, which the city plans to demolish, and Two Mile Pond, the remains of a reservoir breached in 1994.

The plan under discussion would route the trail down the hill closer to the road and over a new pedestrian bridge across the river, and continue the trail on the other side of the sand filtration plant and up the hill to the existing Dale Ball Trail.

Findling estimated the cost of the trail, signage and bridge at about \$15,000 and said he has a Power Up grant from PNM to pay for it.

The grant doesn't include the cost of tearing down the plant, originally estimated at about \$50,000. The price is likely to be higher because of pipes and valves underneath the building. The plant hasn't been used for sand filtration since the 1970s and is an eyesore. All the windows are broken, and the structure is covered with graffiti. The city also wants to build a fence around the pump vault and other infrastructure.

City Councilor Joseph Maestas has been working with the city and neighbors on the plan for improving the area, which might include an upgrade to the well-used parking lot to make it easier to get in and out.

The parking lot is a hiking hub, providing access to two parts of the Dale Ball Trails as well as The Nature Conservancy's Canyon Preserve and a 1.2-mile loop trail, where there are regular reports of bear, deer and bobcats.

"I care deeply about that area," Maestas said. "It's one of the jewels of Santa Fe."

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