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Bill would advance plan for 500-mile Rio Grande Trail

By Milan Simonich and Staci Matlock, *The New Mexican*

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Every year, more than 2 million people visit the 2,180-mile Appalachian Trail that weaves through 14 states along its namesake mountain range, from Georgia to Maine. The Continental Divide Trail is even tougher, crossing 3,100 remote miles from Mexico to Canada, including part of New Mexico.

Now a bloc of state legislators from both major political parties wants to create a 500-mile recreation trail along the Rio Grande from the Colorado line to the Texas border. They say it would be a magnet for tourists.

Lawmakers on Thursday (Feb. 19) announced support for a bill introduced by Rep. Jeff Steinborn, D-Las Cruces, to create a Rio Grande Trail Commission. Steinborn recruited a handful of Republican lawmakers, and they joined him during a news conference at the Capitol.

Segments of a trail along the Rio Grande already exist. They include areas around Taos, Elephant Butte, Las Cruces and the Bosque in Albuquerque.

"The Rio Grande passes by iconic New Mexico landmarks, including three national monuments, six state parks, two national wildlife refuges and beautiful stretches of river," Steinborn said.

Republican Reps. Jason Harper of Rio Rancho, Dianne Hamilton of Silver City and Alonzo Baldonado of Los Lunas joined Steinborn and other Democrats at the announcement. "I think it's an amazing idea," Harper said. "I just love the vision behind this."

In Northern New Mexico, close to 20 miles of trail on public land skirt along portions of the Rio Grande Gorge, a rift several hundred feet deep that cradles the river in the bottom. More than 180,000 people visited the area from Orilla Verde to Ute Mountain last year, according to Tami Torres, outdoor recreation planner for the BLM's Taos Field Office. She said hiking, sightseeing, boating and mountain biking are top activities in an area graced by bighorn sheep, otters and Rio Grande cutthroat trout.

She said a Rio Grande Trail would attract endurance runners, horseback riders and backpackers.

Such a trail would take years and face numerous challenges, said Rod Torrez, a former staffer at Bandelier National Monument, who launched an outdoor advocacy group called Hecho.

“There are the practical issues of terrain,” Torrez said. “Then there are all of the different political issues of agencies, public lands, tribal lands and private lands.” But Torrez said he has no doubt people would love to visit such a trail along an iconic river.

Camilla Feibelman, director of the Sierra Club’s Rio Grande Chapter, said the group’s current fight with the city of Albuquerque over developing a trail along the Rio Grande is a cautionary tale. The city began clearing a mile-long, 8-foot-wide swath in the Rio Grande Bosque while the community was still weighing in on the best way to build a trail there, she said.

A trail is a good idea, Feibelman said, but “planners have to be careful. This is an extremely delicate ecosystem. The trails get pushed right up to the edge of the river and can impact vegetation and birds.”

Steinborn’s bill, introduced Thursday, would create a Rio Grande Trail Commission to recommend the best path. He said the commission could include cities, counties, tribes, conservancy districts, federal agencies and private citizens.

The state authorized a \$250,000 study of a Rio Grande Trail years ago, but the idea fizzled, Steinborn said. Passing a law to create the Rio Grande Trail Commission would ensure a long-term commitment to the project, he said.

One concept would guide the commission, he said. The trail would only cross land with the permission of its owners. Current law already allows the Cabinet secretary of the state Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department to establish state trails.

Steinborn said he envisions the state launching the commission with seed money, but he expects the project to progress with private donations.



Cindy Brown

The Rio Grande, pictured from the Petaca Point overlook near Taos. New Mexico lawmakers have expressed support for a bill that would create a 500-mile recreational trail along the river that would stretch along the state from Colorado to Mexico.