

Rio Grande Trail project sails through Legislature

By Staci Matlock, *The New Mexican*

The Taos News, 3/26/2015

The possibility of a 500-mile recreation trail along the meandering Rio Grande will move closer to reality if Gov. Susana Martinez inks a bill that sailed through both houses this session with little opposition.

House Bill 563, which passed the Senate 32-3 Friday (March 20) and was approved 63-1 on the House floor March 6, creates a commission to study the best path for the Rio Grande Trail, working with multiple federal, tribal, state and private entities that own land through which it might pass between New Mexico's borders with Colorado and Mexico.

Bill sponsor Rep. Jeff Steinborn, D-Las Cruces, said the idea for the trail isn't a new one in the New Mexico Legislature. "But we haven't put the muscle behind making it happen until now," Steinborn said. "It is a big project. It will take time and commitment to make it happen."

Steinborn said his commitment to the trail was sparked again after he hiked a 50-mile stretch of the Appalachian Trail last year with former Rep. Nate Cody. "I fully appreciated not only the awesome experience of getting out for a long-distance hike, but just the economic development and money that is spent by the outdoor industry — restaurants, hotels, shuttle drivers. I got new passion and excitement of bringing this to New Mexico through the central corridor."

Republican Reps. Jason Harper of Rio Rancho, Dianne Hamilton of Silver City and Alonzo Baldonado of Los Lunas joined Steinborn and other Democrats in promoting the bill.

A Rio Grande Trail could have access points in many New Mexico communities, and could include numerous existing trails and landmarks. Three national monuments, six state parks, two national wildlife refuges and other public lands lie along the river. "And it would be New Mexico's own. It would be our own indigenous, long-distance trail," Steinborn said.

He hopes some existing public trails along the river could be designated as part of the route right away.

A Senate amendment to the bill prohibits eminent domain over private land from being used to create any portion of the trail. Amendments also require public meetings to be held to discuss the trail's routes and the creation of a website. The bill creates a fund for the trail, which will come from legislative appropriations.

A portion of the Continental Divide Trail also passes through New Mexico, but many portions are remote and hard to reach.

The full length of the Rio Grande stretches 1,896 miles from its headwaters in central Colorado to where it meets the sea in the Gulf of Mexico. The river's watershed encompasses 182,000 square miles.

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