

Taos Land Trust gets \$575K for wetlands

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Where the Rio Fernando runs through the old Romo property in Taos, the Taos Land Trust sees not only the coursing of the place's history with an acequia and fallow farming land, but the possibilities for the place's future.

In a partnership between the Coca-Cola Company and the nonprofit National Recreation and Park Association, the land trust was awarded a \$575,000 grant to make those visions a reality.

The “timely ... and transformational” money will mostly be put toward the revival of the wetland associated with the Rio Fernando, according to Taos Land Trust Executive Director Kristina Ortez de Jones.

Some of the funds will also be used to rebuild the Vigil y Romo Acequia on the property so that mountain streams can again irrigate the land, opening opportunities for experiments in community gardening and other agricultural projects.

“The Rio Fernando Park is emblematic of the values held by all Taosians with its seven acres of wetlands and 13 acres of now-fallow land that will be brought back to life with this important award,” Ortez de Jones said. The Romo property and future park are adjacent to Fred Baca Park.

“It was a beautiful series of serendipitous events,” she said of getting the award. “We are grateful for the opportunity to create a public space that meets our community's need for open space, locally grown food and pathways for walking and bike-riding.”

The land trust purchased the Romo property in December 2015 and moved into the house-turned-office this past April. Since then, a quarter-mile trail was built on the property — laying the physical and mental foundations for the Rio Fernando Park that will now come into shape a lot faster thanks to the grant, explained Ortez de Jones.

The beginning of the wetland restoration, she said, will start with “safely and deliberately removing those introduced species,” like Russian olive and Siberian elm. At the same time, the land trust will reintroduce native plants that can help maintain and mitigate the flow of the river through the wetland.

The stream has been channelized, such that water rushes through the stream bed, making it harder for wetland life to really flourish. In some places, the river may need re-engineering to improve the banks.

In the long run, the land trust wants the Rio Fernando to be a functional wetland — slowing down and cleaning water. As climate change forces water users to take a hard look at the availability, timing and quality of water in the future, wetlands have come to be seen as an important tool.

At the same time as the land trust works to restore the wetland to peak conditions, the organization will use that momentum to continue planning for more trails and access to public spaces.

“We’ve asked neighbors, the community — What is missing in terms of public spaces and places? What should we do here? Overwhelmingly, people felt this place should be a park. People really want trails,” said Ortez de Jones.

Yet not all parks are created equal. “You have to look at this through the lens of access. You have to make an effort to get to our parks in Taos. And who doesn’t have access to those public places ... the immigrant community, people without cars. A lot of people don’t have access,” she said.

The money for the land trust is part of Coca-Cola’s corporate effort to fund water-related projects in important watersheds around the country. Coca Cola’s money has also funded stream and wetland restoration in the Valle Vidal in the Carson National Forest.

“Supporting projects like this one ... helps us continue to balance all of the water we use in our beverages and return it to nature and communities,” said Jon Radtke, a water sustainability director at Coca-Cola North America, in a press release.

The Youth Conservation Corps, based in Santa Fe, also award the land trust a grant for acequia restoration by hiring local youth, totaling about

\$100,000.



The \$575,000 grant will make it possible for the Taos Land Trust to revitalize the wetland of the Rio Fernando. Invasive species will eventually be removed while native plants will be planted.

Photo courtesy Taos Land Trust