



THE TAOS NEWS

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Group takes first steps toward Questa-Red River Canyon trail

By **Ellen Miller-Goins**, *Sangre de Cristo Chronicle*

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If a group of public officials, volunteers and forest advocates has its way, a forest trail along the river between Questa and Red River could become a reality. A group of close to 30 people crowded into a Village of Questa meeting room to discuss the proposal Wednesday afternoon (Jan. 10).

The facilitating staff from the National Forest Foundation present at the meeting included Rebecca Davidson, Director of the Southern Rockies Program, Emily Olsen, Colorado Program Manager, and Spencer Plumb, Southern Rockies Program Associate. According to its website, the National Forest Foundation was chartered by Congress in 1993 with a mission to “bring people together to restore and enhance [the] National Forests and Grasslands.” The forest foundation acts as the nonprofit partner of the U.S. Forest Service.

Attendees at the meeting also included Carson National Forest representatives from the Questa Ranger District, Chevron Mine, Village of Questa, Town of Red River, Red River Ski Area, Enchanted Forest Cross Country Ski Area and several nonprofits: Questa History and Community Trail, Trout Unlimited, Del Norte Mountain Bike Alliance and Amigos Bravos.

In opening the discussion, Questa District Ranger Jack Lewis candidly admitted the Forest Service faces challenges: “We can’t afford to build new trails. We can’t afford to maintain the trails we have now. We would need a commitment by communities to maintain this trail.”

Lewis then reassured the group: “This is not a project we would be a stumbling block on. We will be focusing on getting done whatever we need to get done in the National Forest.”

Eric Garner, Questa Ranger District recreation staff officer, noted many key players with the proposed project had already met about a year ago to discuss a trail that would use parts of the Chevron Mine’s tailings pipeline for a trail from the Questa ranger station to Columbine campground.

“As Jack said, our funds are limited but together we can leverage our resources. We need to know if this is something our communities are interested in,” Garner said.

Gabriel Herrera, mine project manager, outlined their projected schedule for removing the pipeline and restoring associated areas (including clean up wherever there were tailings spills), noting the mine has already done a feasibility study for a trail on the existing pipeline area from Questa Ranger Station to Columbine.

According to Herrera, if the trail followed the tailings pipeline all the way, it would involve several highway crossings. A second option would follow some pipe rights-of-way areas, Department of Transportation rights-of-way and the river; however, this would require decking and bridges in places.

“There is not enough time to show everything, but we wanted to show that we’ve given it some thought,” Herrera said.

According to the federal Environmental Protection Agency, on Aug. 9, 2016, the EPA, Department of Justice and the state of New Mexico announced a settlement with Chevron Mining, Inc. requiring approximately \$143 million in cleanup work at the Chevron Questa Mine Superfund site.

At the meeting, Walt Foley, Deputy General Manager and Director of Mountain operations at Red River Ski & Summer Area asked, “Is a 12to 13-mile trail on the table?”

Eric Garner replied, “Whatever you guys want.”

Referring to the washes near Red River that see frequent mud flows, forestry technician Ricardo Leon at the Questa Ranger District said if a trail were to continue east of Columbine campground, “the biggest hurdle, after the washes, is maintaining this investment.”

Jeff Muggleston, chairman of the Del Norte Mountain Bike Alliance asked about the National Environmental Policy Act process. “How much special approval is that going to take?”

Lewis replied, “A lot depends on the design. We’ll look at erosion, wildlife, soils.... The better plan we have, the easier it is to move through our process.”

Members of the group agreed to volunteer for several planning groups with specific missions and planned to meet again in late February or early March.

Editor’s note: Chronicle owner Ellen Miller-Goins also owns Enchanted Forest Cross Country Ski Area.

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A bridge crosses the Red River at Fawn Lakes campground. Chronicle file photo