

## **Taosenos hope to perk up parks**

By Jesse Moya, [jmoya@taosnews.com](mailto:jmoya@taosnews.com)

*The Taos News*, 6/14/2018

Jenny Bird spends her weekends like many grandparents in Taos.

She gets the hats and the water and loads up the car with her grandson to head to the parks for a day of fun in the sun. Together, she and her grandson Leo play on the equipment and walk around as long as the snacks and sun hold out.

“It’s just a great place to be on a sunny day,” said Bird at Kit Carson Park.

Taosenos like Bird love their town parks. But parks in Taos have been the recent subject of funding, safety and maintenance concerns causing town officials and others to look at improvements, such as adding nets on sports courts, picking up trash and upping police presence.

“There were signs of alcohol use and like everywhere, too many cigarette butts to pick up,” said Taos area local Azalea Gusterson recently. “It really looks like the town does a good job of cleaning up, and just a few people could clean up a little better after themselves.”

Gusterson organized a cleanup of Kit Carson Park after being a part of a social media conversation that brought up problems of drinking, drug use, vagrancy and litter in the parks around Taos. While no drug paraphernalia was found during her cleanup, Gusterson says evidence of drug use in the park turns up from time to time.

Kit Carson is one of three parks owned by the town. Along with Eco Park and Fred Baca, the three parks cover about 50 acres within town limits. They are frequented by community members from all walks of life.

Mitch Miller, facilities and special events director, estimates more than 500 people per day visit the parks. There are “a multitude of benefits for the parks in Taos,” Miller said. “We feel better knowing people are there. Using the facilities makes us feel really good. We all like seeing our parks used by the different people in the community.”

Now the town is looking to address park improvements through a parks master plan and other community efforts.

### **Parks with purpose**

Each park has some unique features.

Eco Park, located off Salazar Road near the rodeo grounds, is the town’s largest park, but it is owned by Taos Municipal Schools. The park is set up as an athletic facility with a walking track, locker rooms and synthetic turf field. The field is regularly used by soccer players, runners and families alike and is even prepared for two more soccer fields to be built.

Kit Carson Park lies in the heart of town within the historical district and is the most visited park in the town, according to officials. With basketball and volleyball courts, Kit Carson Park often sees a group

of people using each. The park also serves as the town's outdoor concert venue, Little League fields and dog park and nearly always has people enjoying the space.

Fred Baca Park is perhaps the most unique within the town's parks. While holding many of the same features, Fred Baca also has a raised nature trail to overlook the wetlands naturally occurring on the land from the Rio Fernando. Parkgoers also can catch a sight of a few migratory waterfowl in the area from the park trail.



**Taosenos Jayme Santistevan, 15, and Jalen Montano, 14 play football with Juan Diego, 7, of Las Vegas, May 12 during the 17th annual Mother's Day Music Festival at Kit Carson Park in Taos.**

**Morgan Timms**

### **Safer parks**

Despite the number of town employees and attention focused on the parks, some in Taos feel that the parks are in need of more work and more security. According to a recent parks master plan study conducted by consultants from Design Office, people in Taos feel the parks could be safer. Taos Police Chief David Trujillo agrees and said his officers deal with a number of issues in the various parks.

“Kit Carson Park is the busiest park, being that it is located in the Historic District,” Trujillo said in an email. “Typically, the officers will receive about five calls to the park a week on average.

These calls, according to Trujillo, are mostly for vagrancy, drugs and alcohol as well as fights. The calls typically vary from park to park, but the most common are alcohol-related.

In the town's parks survey, residents expressed concerns about and problems with vagrancy and drug issues, a topic that Trujillo said he is looking to have covered soon. In a recent *Taos News* poll, 23 percent of responses expressed needs for more security patrols in the parks.

“For the most part, the public is concerned at the appearance of vagrants,” Miller said. “Generally, where we have concerns is with people camping overnight.”

The town closes the parks for the evening in an attempt to keep crime out. And, Trujillo’s officers make frequent patrols at the parks; however, much of their time is spent on other issues around the town, he said.

The police are looking at adding a full-time officer to patrol the historic district to include Kit Carson Park. Trujillo also said the department is hoping to see some lights installed in the parks to prevent overnight camping and other illegal activities.

### **Maintenance and money**

Miller oversees the nearly 20 employees who maintain the parks as well as the budget that covers the maintenance and upkeep. Roughly \$172,000 of the town’s \$11 million operating budget is set aside to maintain all three parks as well as the plaza. Of that, Miller estimates around \$70,000 is the cost for utilities alone.

All three of the parks have water and electricity on site. Money for the parks’ features and maintenance comes from the town’s general fund.

The town parks are opened every day around 7 a.m. until sunset. Employees do a quick spot check of the area and open any gates or restrooms that might need to be locked overnight. These employees then perform a quick trash pickup of anything visible and head to the next park.

About \$15,000 of the parks’ total budget is reserved for cleaning supplies, \$13,000 for tree care as well as \$14,000 for the repair of small-engine machines, such as lawnmowers and other tools. Within the parks, employees can be seen cleaning and picking up trash during their visits and are common presence in the parks thanks to their budget.

In addition, Miller said the town receives some special grant funding for the care of trees in the parks.

Town Manager Rick Bellis also points out that the town of Taos provides park services for the entire county to use at the cost of the town residents. Bellis estimates that the majority of users at the parks are county residents who live outside the town’s jurisdictions. They give input but little financial support for the parks, he said.

“The Town provides the facilities for the school system, baseball and soccer leagues and the entire region without any financial help from the schools, county or other jurisdictions,” Bellis said.

### **A parks master plan**

After several meetings with Santa Fe-based consultants Design Office, the town is building a parks master plan based on input from the community. The process has mapped out the issues, such as crime and disrepair in the parks, including old or broken equipment. A 71-page drafted document explores the features of the parks as well as the possible improvements needed and wanted. The plan includes possible design changes and better use of some of the features, such as expanding the one field into three at Eco Park.

The plan has yet to be finally approved and adopted by the town; however, Design Office held several community meetings gathering information from the public.

Though Bellis said the master plans goals are “long-term in nature,” they will serve as a guiding rubric for the future of Taos parks.

Some of the plans for the parks include a lawn renovation at Kit Carson Park, a restoration of wetlands and possible expansion at Fred Baca Park as well as possible playground equipment at Eco Park.

### **“We chill here”**

Whatever the future of the parks, Taosenos will continue to use the facilities as best as they can. The parks will always be a gathering place for people to meet up and have fun—be it the family with a few children, the solo walker with headphones or the group of teenagers having a water fight.

From the wetlands of Fred Baca to the turf field of Eco, community members flock to the parks.

“We chill here,” said Taos resident Sundeep Taniguchi about Kit Carson Park. “This is just where everyone goes. It’s convenient and it’s close to the center of town.”

### **Annual Park Costs**

Total maintenance budget: \$172,000 Utilities: \$70,000 Cleaning supplies: \$15,000 Tree care - \$13,000



**A tennis court-turned-dog park as seen Thursday (May 24) at Kit Carson Park.**



**The 17th annual Mother’s Day Music festival drew crowds to Kit Carson Park May 12 in Taos.**