



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## Forest Service mulls moving part of Williams Lake Trail

### 7 miles of biking trails also proposed

By **Cody Hooks**, [chooks@taosnews.com](mailto:chooks@taosnews.com)

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Williams Lake Trail is the fastest route to the highest place in the whole of the Land of Enchantment. It's one of the most popular trails in Taos County, and it could be getting a major realignment if a Taos Ski Valley proposal working its way through the Carson National Forest is approved later this summer.

A proposal sitting before leaders at the national forest calls for moving three-quarters of a mile of the 2-mile path, a trail that winds through the alpine ecosystems above Taos Ski Valley and is heavily used by both locals and tourists year-round.

The Forest Service released a scoping letter describing the basic details of the "2018 Taos Ski Valley Trails Project" Tuesday (June 5). The project, which also calls for the construction of six new mountain biking trails totaling about 7.2 miles, will not undergo an extensive environmental review. The public has until Tuesday (June 19) to comment on the proposal.

Taos Ski Valley is proposing to permanently relocate the first 4,500 feet of the Williams Lake Trail "in order to enhance the aesthetics of the...trailhead and to improve the hiker's initial experience of the trail," according to the scoping letter. The new route would cross land owned by the ski valley, which would establish an easement with the forest service, the letter said.

From the trailhead, walkers travel along a service road before reaching the more forested part of the trail as well as the boundary of the Columbine- Hondo Wilderness.

But at least one Taos-area resident wants to hear more from the Forest Service about the reasoning behind the proposed new route.

"I think people just need more information than what was provided on the scoping letter in regards to why the trail is being rerouted now, why to that location, who is building the trail..." said Emily Sadow.

According to the Carson's "schedule of proposed actions," the project counts as a "categorical exclusion," which is meant to streamline and reduce paperwork in implementing the National Environmental Protection Act. For bigger projects, federal agencies often have to go through an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

However, according to a NEPA handbook, categorical exclusions are allowed when a project won't have a significant impact on the "human environment."

Again, Sadow thinks the project could mean big changes for the sensitive alpine environment above the ski valley.

"The Williams Lake Trail is one of the most popular trails in New Mexico and is burdened with heavy traffic. The new proposed alignment of the trail could have major impacts on an area that contains innumerable springs, feeds a watershed and is home to countless flora and fauna," she said.

A final decision about the project is expected in August. No official from the Forest Service could be reached for comment about the project as of press time.

As for the mountain biking trails, the ski area wants to build 7.2 miles of flow (downhill), cross-country and hybrid trails to draw in more visitors and offer more ways to play outside when the mountains are devoid of snow. In light of climate change and the abysmal snowfall over the previous winter, the strategy is obviously necessary for places dependent on an influx of tourists and visitors.

Mountain biking is “one of the most popular and growing activities in the United States and even internationally,” said Carl Colonius, a local outdoorsman and trails advocate. “We’ve seen a significant increase in bikers in the area over the last decade that mirrors the growth of the sport around the country.”

The six new trails would cross both private and public land that’s already within the boundaries of the ski valley’s special use permit area, according to the scoping letter.

### **Public Comment**

The 14-day public comment period ends Tuesday (June 19). Include '2018 Taos Ski Valley Trails Project' in the subject line of emails and letters. How to submit comments to the Carson National Forest: Email: [commentssouthwestern-carson-questa@fs.fed.us](mailto:commentssouthwestern-carson-questa@fs.fed.us) Mail: James Duran, Forest Supervisor c/o Jake Lewis, Questa District Ranger P.O. Box 110 Questa, NM 87556

### **Hand delivery:**

Questa Ranger station 184 State Road 38 Questa, NM 87556 Weekdays from 9 a.m to 12:30 p.m., 1:30 to 4 p.m.



**Karin Eberhardt**