



THE TAOS NEWS

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A new and 'wild' park for a changing Taos

Dozens helped when it came to digging up the meat as it cooked underground Saturday (Oct. 6) during Taos Land Trust's 2018 matanza feast at the Río Fernando Park in Taos.

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Even though Taoseños are enviously close to some of the Southwest's wildest places, getting there is not a given. Not everyone has a truck or the physical ability to get into the woods and backcountry, and it's all too easy to get tied up with work and family. That's why a new park, thick with wetlands and an air of wilderness, is starting to emerge a mile from downtown Taos.

The Río Fernando Park is a 20-acre mix of critical river habitat and old agricultural lands that were farmed hard and abandoned. In the three years since the Taos Land Trust purchased the property and a group of co-workers, friends, neighbors and, eventually, the community began imagining what the park could be, it's already starting to take shape.

Over the summer, a crew of young people from Taos worked their first jobs repairing the Vigil y Romo Acequia that runs along the edge of the park. This past week, the land was host to a traditional New Mexico matanza.

And at any given time in the week, kids run through the plum thicket or play in giant nests weaved from the limbs of invasive trees — it's not a playground, per se, but it's filled with play.

The Río Fernando Park is meant as a compliment, not competition, to the other parks in town. Kit Carson is the Central Park of Taos, with the space to host big events, such as craft fairs and concerts, while the Eco Park and Filemon Sanchez Park have fields for adult and youth sports. Fred Baca, popular for short sprints around the track or taking the dog for a walk, is to the west of the Río Fernando Park on the other side of the river.

As Taos Land Trust Executive Director Kristina Ortez said, it's a park "with a sense of wildness about it."

The Río Fernando Park is open during normal business hours and only during the week. The Taos Land Trust plans to officially open the park in 2019. At the same time, a number of organizations and the town of Taos are working to integrate the park and other open spaces in the downtown area via trails and easily walkable paths and sidewalks.

Planning the Río Fernando Park was jump-started in November with a \$575,000 grant from the National Recreation and Park Association and CocaCola Co.

“The land has changed amazingly over the last two years,” said land trust board president Sanjay Poovadan. “It’s taken a lot of work and good thinking from various... veins of our community. It’s an amazing place now and the future looks good.”

“Río Fernando Park is a unique parcel of wetland, forest and former ranchland. Connecting nearby trails and providing additional access to the park ensures the community will enjoy this historic and beautiful park for years to come,” said Louis Bacon, owner of Taos Ski Valley and The Taos Ski Valley Foundation, which has provided additional financial support to the park and restoration efforts.

Aside from quarter- and half-mile walking paths, the next big project to come out of the grant is the restoration of the 7 acres of wetlands on the property, as well as the Río Fernando itself.

“Here, we have to work with water...use it very effectively and efficiently,” said wetland restoration ecologist Steve Vrooman.

In the history of the land, the course of the river was straightened out, so the family could farm more crops. But that channelization has sped up the water and changed the natural sponge like qualities of the wetlands, absorbing the surges from floods and filtering water. Around January, work to restore the wetlands will begin in earnest.

Vrooman and his crew will move earth and plants in the wetlands, such as 1,000-pound chunks of native grasses and dirt, and reshape the river to a more natural meander. Along with removing invasive species and encouraging willows to grow in their place, this will improve habitat for beavers, a sometimes unloved but vital player in natural wetlands.

“Beavers are totally symbiotic with willows. You have to be part of it,” Vrooman said.

Though the park’s wetlands will “look a little rough” until things green out in the spring, he said, it’s a necessary step in creating a park that is more to the community than a nice place for a picnic, a park that matches the realities of accessibility in Taos and the anticipated consequences of a changing climate.

Instead of digging new wells, “we really have to work with the resources available,” said land trust arborist Ben Wright. The repaired acequia, which has been dry for decades, may not get water regularly. But the project, like the park, was a learning opportunity for everyone involved, including the town government that’s committed itself to preserving cultural and agricultural traditions.

The bigger vision calls for bringing more educational opportunities to the park, as well as building a new office, community learning space and parking lot, and concentrating that activity on the other end of the property that’s not critical wetland habitat.

The park is also a key part of the Río Fernando Collaborative, a group of organizations working to revitalize the river all the way from the headwaters to its confluence past the new park.