

Trail seen as first step in creating path to Angel Fire Veterans Memorial

By Ellen Miller-Goins

The Taos News, 10/18/2018

It was a difficult decision but all but one of Angel Fire's council members voted to accept a grant that is seen as the first step toward creating a wheelchair trail from the Village of Angel Fire to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Twice in September, councilors debated the merits of accepting a cooperative agreement to design and build a trail from Camino Grande on State Road 434 to the entrance of the Veteran's Memorial on State Road 64.

With a Sept. 30 deadline looming, the council voted during its Sept. 11 regular meeting to postpone the decision, so village staff could do further research.

"This was a project that was presented several years ago. It was funded but the funding was taken away," village grants administrator Sandy Garcia told the council at the time.

Garcia said staff at the New Mexico Department of Transportation reached out to her to again offer the funding — with a guarantee the project would be a priority.

The agreement is to spend

\$227,194 with a village contribution of \$56,798. NMDOT has allowed \$106,688 for design and \$120,506 for construction.

Finance Manager Bret Wier and councilors worried about the budgetary impact of a project for which the village had not budgeted. On Sept.

11, the discussion also centered around whether those funds could even complete an ADA compliant trail to the intersection of State Road 434 and US 64.

Maintenance costs were also a concern.

"My experience is, I don't think we're going to get very far," Village Manager Rick Tafoya said. "DOT did say, unofficially, that there was more funding, but they couldn't commit to it."

Mayor Pro Tem Chuck Howe told the council when he is working at the visitor center, "The number one request from all visitors is hiking. I would really like to see this happen."

Council postponed the decision to the Sept. 25 meeting.

At that time Garcia, Mayor Barbara Cottam, Howe and Wier all voiced their concern that turning the funds down would jeopardize the village's relationship with DOT and put future village funding requests — for streets — at the figurative back of the line.

Councilors Steve Larson and Rogers Lanon both expressed concerns around the financial commitment required. Calling it “a waste of taxpayer dollars,” Lanon said, “We're not just building it, we're maintaining it, too.”

Garcia told the council, “This is not just the trail. (DOT is) rolling us into HWY434, the sidewalk project and the trail — it's to combine all three projects. We're taking some costs off and saying what will they help us with. They would like to see us do it.”

An email to Garcia from Heather Sandoval, assistant engineer for District 4, noted, “For the FY18 & FY19 TAP (sidewalks) Project, the NMDOT will provide the survey data, include the village's portion of the project with the department's environmental clearance request, and (combine) the project with the department's upcoming paving project on NM 434. The village will still be responsible for the local match for the (trail) project, but letting the project merge with the department's projects should help reduce construction costs.”

Councilor Larson said, “I would like to do the trail; I just don't want to spend the money.” Howe stated, “Further research shows, this project goes through two fiscal years.”

The village's cooperative share, which could range from \$45,000 to around \$77,000, was also a sticking point, and Mayor Cottam reiterated, “We would go to the bottom of the list with all projects with the NMDOT, not just the trail but roadwork, everything.”

Despite concerns about “public perception” around building a trail when village streets are badly in need of repairs and rebuilding, the council discussed the larger vision of extending the solar trail to Moreno Valley High School and Allen Fields and, from there, building a trail to the memorial.

Discussion continued with some questioning the point of a trail that stops at State Road 434. Councilor Bill Hubbard, who “attended” the meeting via conference call, said, “What is the plan for taking it from the blinking light to the memorial?”

Wier may have tipped the scales, however, when he said, “I am more inclined to support this project. It may all roll into the next fiscal year, and we can budget for it. We have about \$28,000 to come up with this year, but we're already over budget on gross receipts taxes revenue. If we have a normal ski season, we could be over budget by at least \$100,000. That's an unknown.”

Wier also mentioned gross receipts tax to come from the Dollar General currently being built and added, “I do believe that a quality trail system will lead to more dollars for Angel Fire. The sidewalks are going to be built out to Zeb's. The next thing we should focus on is connecting the sidewalks to the start of the trail. I also had a chance to talk to the Enchanted Circle Trails Association. They will be doing a presentation at our next council meeting. Their master plan has a trail (along US 64) from Angel Fire to Eagle Nest. They can find grants and other ways to build new trails.

“Also, part of their program is the maintenance of trails. They would coordinate volunteer-driven trail maintenance.

“In summary, I feel we could come up with the money,” Wier said. “Based on our current GRT position, I think we could find the money without asking anyone to give up from their budget.”

All but councilor Lanon voted to accept the cooperative agreement.

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