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New trails in Arroyo Hondo carry hikers through history, high desert beauty



Autry Tolbert of Santa Fe, left, and her mother, Requa Tolbert of Eldorado, walk the new Arroyo Hondo Open Space Trail on Thursday. The new trail is on an 86-acre property owned and maintained by Santa Fe County. Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican, 17 March 2013



Six hundred years ago, Native Americans made their homes along the banks of what would later be called the Hondo River southeast of Santa Fe.

About 100 years ago, a Chicago banker unsuccessfully tried to dam that river and create a lake.

In 2002, Santa Fe County bought about 86 acres in the same area. And on Friday, the county Open Spaces and Trails Division opened new trailheads that provide members of the public — and their leashed pets — access to the very same piñon-dotted foothills explored by those historical figures long ago.

Santa Fe County Open Space and Trails Resource Manager Scott Kaseman said humans never really stopped using the area. Before the county bought it, he said, Arroyo Hondo residents were already recreating there and had created a maze of “social trails.” These paths meandered along the riparian area that was once the bed of the Hondo River, and up to the ridges, which provide panoramic views of the Jemez, Sandia and Ortiz mountain ranges.

In fact, area residents came to love their nearly private park so much that they raised and donated one-third of the approximately \$1 million that Santa Fe County paid to purchase the property from the Al Reed family. The rest of the money came from a voter-approved bond. Kaseman said the Reeds also lowered their original asking price to facilitate the creation of the public open space.

Over the past four or five years, county staff have partnered with the Trails Alliance of Santa Fe and the Conservation Trust to shore up the user-created trails to prevent erosion. A \$100,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency funded the restoration of the riparian area, which has since become a seasonal stream fed mostly by rain.

Workers also eradicated the non-native Russian olive and elm trees, and replaced them with 60 new cottonwood trees and 100 new willows.

Two different parking lots and two trailheads serve the open space, which includes about 3 miles worth of trails. Both lots include trash cans and complimentary baggies to encourage people to clean up after their pets. One lot, just off Arroyo Hondo Road, has eight parking spaces. The other is just off East Old Agua Fria Road. To reach the lot, follow Old Pecos Trail south across Interstate 25 until it dead-ends, then turn left. The lot has 10 parking spaces.

Five plaques dot the network of trails, showing hikers their exact locations on the looping switchbacks. The trails are located in a corridor between two significant

pueblo ruins — one that contained 1,000 rooms and had an estimated population of 4,000 inhabitants. Hikers also get a clear view of what is left of the banker's long-ago dam, which was partially destroyed by a heavy storm.

Right now, the dirt trails are adorned with squat piñon trees, dun-colored clumps of dried native grasses, spiky yucca plants and patches of cactus. Acid-green lichen moss growing on the reddish rocks that line the trail add spots of brightness.

But in a month or two, Kaseman said, native wildflowers and cactus will begin blooming and bringing a bit more color to the landscape.

“My favorite time to come here is sunset,” Kaseman said. “There are some great views to the west.” From the highest parts of the trail, looking far and away to the southwest, it's possible see Mount Taylor rising in the distance more than 100 miles away.

Contact Phaedra Haywood at 986-3068 or phaywood@sfnewmexican.com.