

Santa Fe County Open Space, Trails and Parks

Annual Report

2023



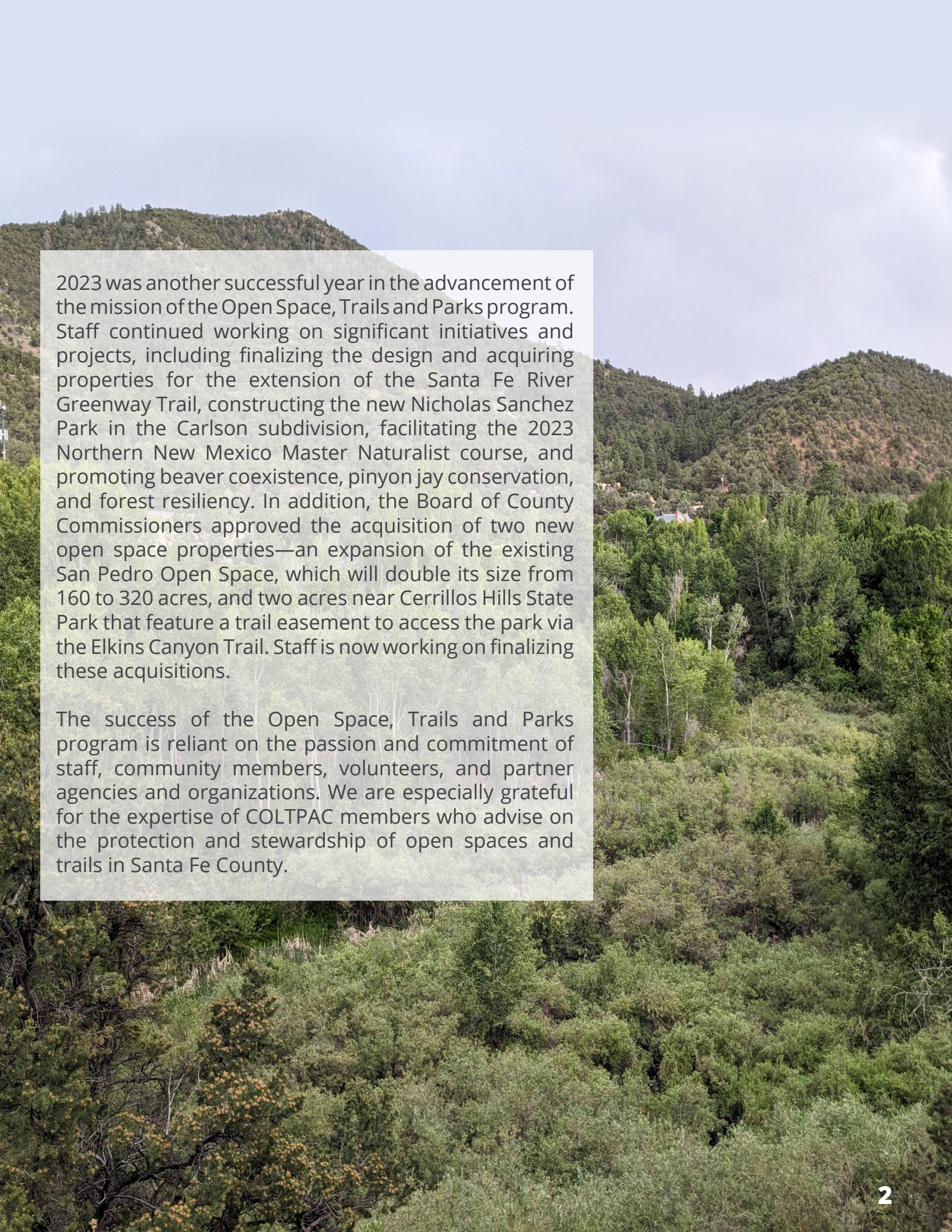


Vision

Santa Fe County's Open Space, Trails and Parks Program sustainably manages and conserves a vibrant network of cultural, historical, recreational and natural community resources that inspire a deep sense of regional identity and stewardship among current and future generations.

Mission

Santa Fe County provides innovative leadership in local land management and conservation that enhances the quality of life for County residents, provides access to public lands for unique outdoor experiences, advances community stewardship through partnerships and effectively leverages community investments in the Open Space, Trails and Parks Program. Management of County open spaces and trail networks provides sustainable and resilient ecosystems with landscape-wide benefits for human, plant and wildlife communities.



2023 was another successful year in the advancement of the mission of the Open Space, Trails and Parks program. Staff continued working on significant initiatives and projects, including finalizing the design and acquiring properties for the extension of the Santa Fe River Greenway Trail, constructing the new Nicholas Sanchez Park in the Carlson subdivision, facilitating the 2023 Northern New Mexico Master Naturalist course, and promoting beaver coexistence, pinyon jay conservation, and forest resiliency. In addition, the Board of County Commissioners approved the acquisition of two new open space properties—an expansion of the existing San Pedro Open Space, which will double its size from 160 to 320 acres, and two acres near Cerrillos Hills State Park that feature a trail easement to access the park via the Elkins Canyon Trail. Staff is now working on finalizing these acquisitions.

The success of the Open Space, Trails and Parks program is reliant on the passion and commitment of staff, community members, volunteers, and partner agencies and organizations. We are especially grateful for the expertise of COLTPAC members who advise on the protection and stewardship of open spaces and trails in Santa Fe County.

2023 Accomplishments

Below are the accomplishments of the Open Space, Trails and Parks program in 2023. They are grouped by sections consistent with the 2019 Open Space, Trails and Parks Strategic Management Plan. Highlighted projects are featured in this report.

Resource Management

- Youth crews with the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps conducted resource management work at Los Potreros Open Space, including removal of invasive plant species, removal of unnecessary fencing, and replacement of barbed wire fencing with wildlife-friendly fencing.
- Staff continued to promote beaver coexistence at Los Potreros Open Space in partnership with Master Naturalists, Rio Grande Return, and Defenders of Wildlife.
- Staff conducted monitoring for Pinyon Jay nesting activity.
- Staff continued a collaborative project evaluating thinning impacts on imperiled piñon-juniper bird species in partnership with Audubon Southwest, Santa Fe National Forest, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Defenders of Wildlife, New Mexico State Land Office, and other partners. Results from this study will inform management strategies at open space properties that contain piñon-juniper habitat.
- Staff continued the first phase of the forest enhancement project at the Ortiz Mountains Preserve in partnership with the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, Defenders of Wildlife, and Master Naturalist volunteers to reduce wildfire fuels and improve wildlife habitat in ponderosa pine forests.
- Santa Fe County partnered with Defenders of Wildlife to continue to promote a model for alternative forest management at the Ortiz Mountains Preserve that aims to conserve wildlife while meeting thinning and fire risk reduction goals. Work included drafting a Forest Thinning for Birds Management Plan with the Nature Conservancy, the US Forest Service, Forest Stewards Guild, the University of New Mexico, Audubon, and the NM Energy Minerals & Natural Resources Department; discussion of the forest management model at the Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project Town Hall meeting; and a series of site visits to bring professionals from forest and fire management agencies to a demonstration area within the Ortiz Mountains Preserve.
- Staff partnered with the New Mexico Wildlife Center's (NMWC) wildlife rehabilitation and release program to conduct releases of native wildlife on appropriate habitat in County open spaces properties. This provides NMWC with many more protected spaces to release animals and contributes to increased biodiversity on County open spaces.
- Staff reengaged with the Galisteo Basin Working Group following a hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This group brings together landowners, tribal members, and

2023 Accomplishments

stakeholders to define and meet goals towards the protection of the Galisteo Basin, which includes Thornton Ranch and Lamy Open Spaces.

- Staff partnered with the Institute for Applied Ecology to collect native seed on County open space properties as part of their Southwest Seed Partnership project, which supports habitat restoration and conservation in the Southwest.
- Maintenance staff completed an average of 120 work orders per month to maintain trails, parks and open space properties.
- Staff received training in post-fire watershed restoration, wetland connectivity, and process-based soil erosion prevention.

Educational Programming and Stewardship

- Staff facilitated the 14-week 2023 Northern New Mexico Master Naturalist training course in partnership with the Randall Davey Audubon Center and the Santa Fe Botanical Garden; 18 participants completed the course.
- Staff trained 7 new Master Naturalist volunteers to be open space property stewards. Property stewards monitor for issues like erosion, fencing repairs, illegal access, illegal barrel cactus removal, unsanctioned trails, and beaver activity. They also remove litter when found and report on plant and wildlife species found on the property.
- Master Naturalist volunteers conducted stewardship activities, such as monitoring for the presence of monarchs and removing invasive plant species.
- Staff installed an educational native plant sign at Arroyo Hondo Open Space designed by the Arroyo Hondo Land Trust Board. Each plant species depicted in the sign was illustrated by local artists in the Arroyo Hondo area.
- Staff installed an educational Pinyon Jay conservation sign donated by Defenders of Wildlife along the Santa Fe River Greenway Trail at the intersection with El Camino Real Trail.

Project Development and Implementation

- The Board of County Commissioners approved the acquisition of 2 new open space properties— “10 Little Hills” near Cerrillos Hills State Park, and an expansion of San Pedro Open Space.
- Staff initiated a preliminary engineering report for floodplain restoration in Rio en Medio Open Space in collaboration with stakeholders across the watershed.

2023 Accomplishments

- Construction began on the NE/SE Connector Project, which includes the realignment of a portion of the Spur Trail and a relocation of the trailhead.
- Staff held a 2-day summit on the co-stewardship of Thornton Ranch Open Space with representatives from 9 Pueblos, Tribes and Nations to discuss the management of culturally significant areas within Thornton Ranch Open Space.
- Staff submitted the draft Environmental Assessment for the Thornton Ranch Open Space planning area to the BLM, which is required for the development of trails on the property.
- Staff completed the acquisition of properties and design of the Santa Fe River Greenway Trail from Siler Road to San Ysidro Crossing.
- Staff completed the design of the staircase and ADA access for the Oscar Huber Memorial Ballpark in Madrid.
- Staff completed the construction of Romero Park Phase II, which includes pickleball courts, a volleyball court, a game area, a picnic shelter adjacent to a native grass lawn, parking area expansion, a dog park, additional connected walking paths and a historic dump site cleanup.
- Staff continued right-of-way acquisitions and finalized the design of Segments 2 and 3 of the Arroyo Hondo Trail, from Turquoise Trail Park at NM Highway 14 to Richards Avenue.
- Staff completed construction of a new shade structure and picnic table at Galisteo Park.
- Staff completed construction of Nicholas Sanchez Park in the Carlson subdivision, which consists of ADA parking, a half-court basketball pad, playground equipment, two sheltered pads with picnic tables, and a swing set.
- Staff completed the design of Nine Mile and Avenida Eldorado Trailheads for additional access points to the Rail Trail.
- Staff worked on finalizing the design of Segment 6 of the Rail Trail, from Spur Ranch Road to US 285, including the design of a trailhead and parking area off of US 285.
- Staff repaired and resealed the pavement of El Camino Real Trail.
- Staff completed the construction of two pickleball courts at Nambe Park.

2023 Accomplishments

Planning and Program Development

- Staff updated the Santa Fe County Wetland Action Plan in partnership with the NM Environment Department, the Santa Fe Watershed Association, COLTPAC members and Ecotone Landscape Planning. This document updates the previous 2012 version and outlines status, needs and goals for the future conservation, restoration and coexistence with Santa Fe County's wetlands.
- Staff initiated the Open Space Conservation and Transfer of Development Rights Program on two open space properties.
- Staff participated in stakeholder meetings for the planning of the Rio Grande Trail, an initiative of the NM Outdoor Recreation Division.
- COLTPAC voted to recommend to the Board of County Commissioners the acquisition of the San Pedro Open Space expansion; and voted to form three new subcommittees—the Acquisition, Trails, and Forest Resiliency subcommittees.

Grant Awards

The Open Space, Trails and Parks program received \$600,000 in funding from grants in 2023. Below is the list of grant awards received.

- \$50,000 grant received from the State of New Mexico to design and construct improvements to the Oscar Huber Memorial Ballpark in Madrid
- \$400,000 grant received from the State of New Mexico to acquire easements and right-of-ways and to plan, design and construct hiking and biking trails in Eldorado
- \$150,000 grant received from the State of New Mexico to acquire easements and right-of-ways and to plan, design and construct an accessible pedestrian safety corridor connecting the public parking lot, public park, playground and ballpark to cultural and historical sites in Madrid



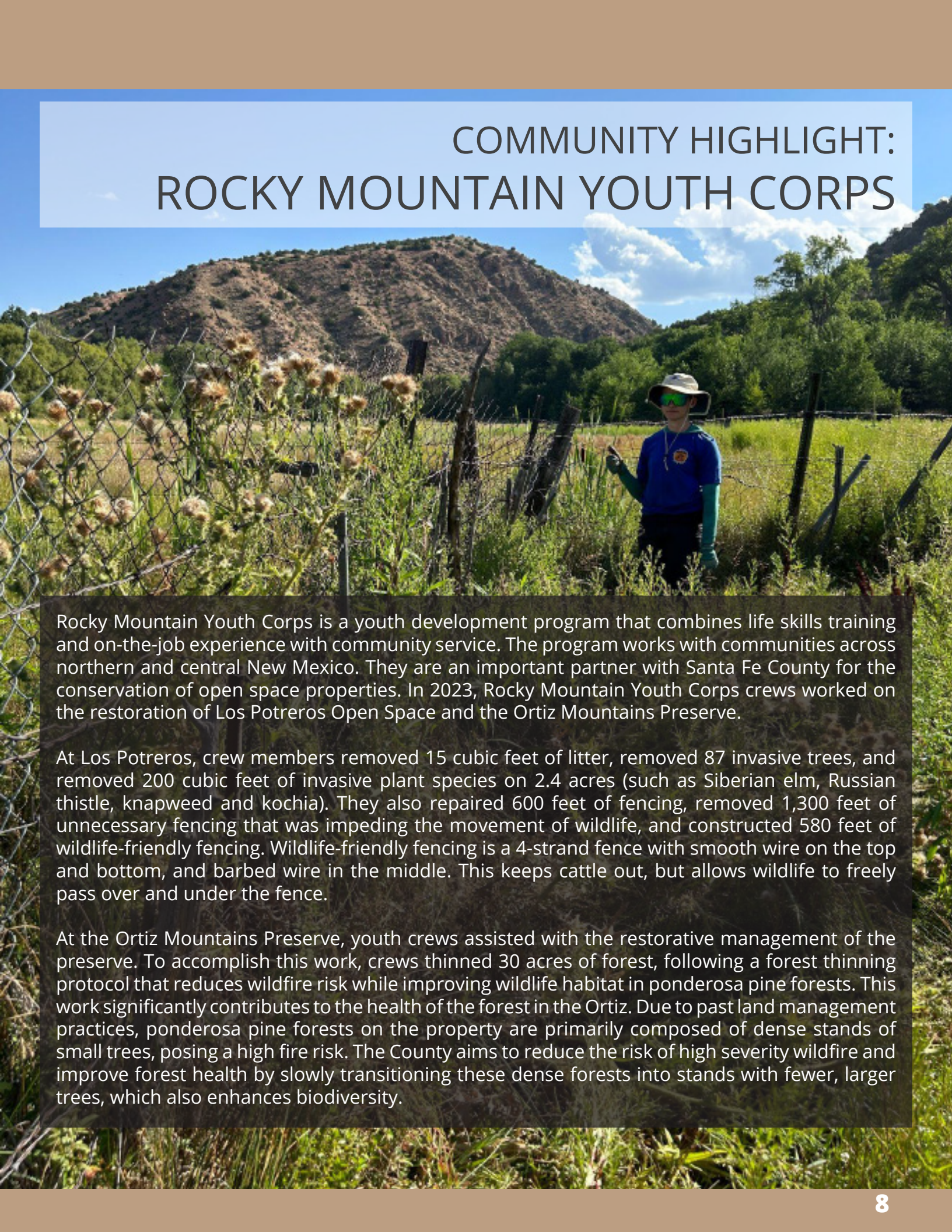
A large wooden trestle bridge structure, likely a remnant of the historic Santa Fe Southern Railway, spans across a dry, open landscape. The bridge is constructed from dark, weathered wood with a complex network of vertical posts and horizontal beams. The surrounding terrain is arid, with sparse, dry vegetation and a few small trees. The sky is filled with large, white, fluffy clouds, suggesting a bright but slightly overcast day. The overall scene conveys a sense of historical significance and natural beauty.

TRAIL HIGHLIGHT: SANTA FE RAIL TRAIL

The Santa Fe Rail Trail is a regional multi-modal commuter and recreational trail that runs from the Santa Fe Railyards to Eldorado along the historic Santa Fe Southern Railway. The trail, a joint City-County project, will eventually continue across US 285 and terminate at the Lamy depot. There are seven phases to the Santa Fe Rail Trail, with a total length of 18 miles. The first five sections have been constructed. Section 6, from Spur Ranch Road to US 285, was designed in 2023, and will be constructed in 2024 and 2025.

Trails are an amenity that improves the quality of life in a community by providing healthy and safe alternative modes of travel. Bicyclists, pedestrians and equestrians use the Rail Trail to recreate and access residential, commercial, educational and recreational areas in Santa Fe, the Community College District, Seton Village, and Eldorado. The Rail Trail has several east-west links in the Eldorado area, as well as the Spur Trail, which connects to the Santa Fe Community College and the Arroyo Hondo Trail. The cost of the Santa Fe Rail Trail is approximately \$6 million, part of which is being paid for by federal grants.

COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHT: ROCKY MOUNTAIN YOUTH CORPS



Rocky Mountain Youth Corps is a youth development program that combines life skills training and on-the-job experience with community service. The program works with communities across northern and central New Mexico. They are an important partner with Santa Fe County for the conservation of open space properties. In 2023, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps crews worked on the restoration of Los Potreros Open Space and the Ortiz Mountains Preserve.

At Los Potreros, crew members removed 15 cubic feet of litter, removed 87 invasive trees, and removed 200 cubic feet of invasive plant species on 2.4 acres (such as Siberian elm, Russian thistle, knapweed and kochia). They also repaired 600 feet of fencing, removed 1,300 feet of unnecessary fencing that was impeding the movement of wildlife, and constructed 580 feet of wildlife-friendly fencing. Wildlife-friendly fencing is a 4-strand fence with smooth wire on the top and bottom, and barbed wire in the middle. This keeps cattle out, but allows wildlife to freely pass over and under the fence.

At the Ortiz Mountains Preserve, youth crews assisted with the restorative management of the preserve. To accomplish this work, crews thinned 30 acres of forest, following a forest thinning protocol that reduces wildfire risk while improving wildlife habitat in ponderosa pine forests. This work significantly contributes to the health of the forest in the Ortiz. Due to past land management practices, ponderosa pine forests on the property are primarily composed of dense stands of small trees, posing a high fire risk. The County aims to reduce the risk of high severity wildfire and improve forest health by slowly transitioning these dense forests into stands with fewer, larger trees, which also enhances biodiversity.

SPECIES HIGHLIGHT: PINYON JAYS

Pinyon Jays are crestless, blue jays that travel in large, noisy flocks. They are found in the Western United States, primarily in piñon-juniper woodlands, one of the most common ecosystem types in Santa Fe County. The primary food of Pinyon Jays are the seeds from piñon pines. They eat many piñon on the spot and also hide some to eat later. Their expandable esophagus allows them to carry 40 seeds at a time, which they cache across the landscape. Pinyon Jays have excellent spatial memory that helps them find the buried seeds, but they inevitably forget a few, which may then sprout to become piñon pine seedlings. The lives of Pinyon Jays and piñon pines are deeply intertwined—they rely on each other to survive and thrive. However, the populations of Pinyon Jays have declined by 85% in the past 50 years, primarily due to habitat loss. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that the Pinyon Jay warrants consideration of protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and is currently reviewing its status in the wild before making an official ESA listing decision.

Santa Fe County has partnered with Defenders of Wildlife to help protect this iconic bird. County staff installed a Pinyon Jay conservation sign donated by Defenders of Wildlife along the Santa Fe River Greenway trail to inform trail users about the Pinyon Jay and how to protect piñon pines.

Santa Fe County is also supporting a collaborative project to evaluate the impacts of forest thinning on imperiled piñon-juniper bird species, including the Pinyon Jay, in partnership with Audubon Southwest, Santa Fe National Forest, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Defenders of Wildlife, New Mexico State Land Office, and other partners. Results from this study will inform management strategies on open space properties that contain piñon-juniper habitat. In addition, County staff annually monitor for Pinyon Jay nesting activity at open space properties, and pause resource management work during the breeding season.

Santa Fe County residents can help by participating in the Pinyon Jay Private Lands Conservation Program. To get involved, see: defenders.org/wildlife/pinyon-jay.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: OPEN SPACE ACQUISITIONS

2011 was the last time Santa Fe County purchased an open space property unrelated to property acquisitions for regional trails. In 2023, the Board of County Commissioners approved the acquisition of two new open space properties—an expansion of San Pedro Open Space located near Golden, and “10 Little Hills,” located near Cerrillos Hills State Park.

The expansion of the San Pedro Open Space will double the acreage of the property from 160 acres to 320 acres. The property features piñon-juniper woodlands at the base of the San Pedro Mountains. It is located on the Turquoise Trail along Highway 14, and protection of the parcels as open space will protect one mile of the viewshed of the Turquoise Trail. The existing San Pedro Open Space is currently closed to the public. Once the purchase of the expansion is finalized, staff will begin working on a master plan for the development of trails on the property for non-motorized recreation. The Board of County Commissioners approved the purchase of the expansion for \$530,000.

10 Little Hills is a two-acre parcel located near Cerrillos Hills State Park. The current landowner has generously offered to donate this parcel to the County. The property features piñon-juniper savanna and a trail easement for the Elkins Canyon Trail, which enters Cerrillos Hills State Park and serves as a connection to other trails in the park. The acquisition of this parcel would protect the trail as well as the viewshed from potential future impacts such as residential development.

For both properties, an acquisition application was brought forward by community members to the County Open Lands, Trails and Parks Advisory Committee (COLTPAC), who reviewed the application, conducted site visits to the properties, assessed the properties for their cultural, recreational, aesthetic and ecological values, and then voted to recommend the acquisition of the properties to the Board of County Commissioners. Staff is now conducting environmental and cultural resource surveys on the properties prior to finalizing the acquisitions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Santa Fe County Board of County Commissioners

Hank Hughes – District 5, Chair
Justin S. Greene – District 1
Anna Hansen – District 2
Camilla Bustamante – District 3
Anna T. Hamilton – District 4

County Leadership

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Leandro Cordova, Deputy County Manager
Penny Ellis-Green, Growth Management Department Director
Lisaida Archuleta, Deputy Growth Management Department Director
Gary Brett Clavio, Planning Manager
Brian Snyder, Public Works Department Director
PJ Montaña, Facilities & Projects Division Director
Paul Olafson, Community Development Department Director

County Open Lands, Trails and Parks Advisory Committee (COLTPAC)

Christopher Mann, District 2, Chair
Steven Forde, At-Large, Vice Chair
Sandra Madrid-Massengill, District 1
Jill St. Thomas, District 3
Paige Grant, District 4
Jan Cohen, District 5
Genna Waldvogel, At-Large
Dan Potter, At-Large

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William Pena, Maintenance Technician
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