

RGBNA
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Dear Alibi,

Ortiz Y Pino has it wrong regarding the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy and the so-called Ditches with Trails Project (Ortiz Y Pino, Flush The Ditch Taxes, Aug. 21-27).

The plan to replace the serene and natural Valley ditch trails with a commercialized urban trail system was a bad idea from the start and railing against the Conservancy will not make it any better. What is most disturbing about the column, however, is its complete misrepresentation of the facts.

First, the claim that people are not welcome to use the existing ditch trails is simply untrue. Every week thousands of people walk, jog, ride horses, fish, bird watch and bike along the ditch banks and that will not change. School and community-based trail projects are not in jeopardy and neighborhoods will not lose access to local trail projects or stewardship programs. The trails will be maintained in their natural habitat and the Conservancy will continue to be the quiet caretaker of the largest continuous cottonwood forest in North America, the 30,000-acre Rio Grande Bosque.

Second, it is not true that the Conservancy reneged on an agreement to cooperate with Ditches With Trails (DWT) if it was given immunity from legal liability. In 2005, the Conservancy passed Resolution M-03-14-05-91 that allowed a study to explore the feasibility of creating a formal trail network along Conservancy ditch banks. Liability was one of many issues to have been considered, but more than three years later the study is nowhere to be found. The resolution was not an authorization to design or build anything, nor did it establish a multi-jurisdictional partnership or agreement with anyone. DWT has no one but themselves to blame for failing to live up to their responsibility to conduct a fair and objective analysis of the proposal.

Third, the State Legislature did not pass a bill giving the Conservancy immunity from liability. What the legislature did pass was enabling legislation to permit the shifting of liability from the District to another municipality if there was a willing recipient. It is not surprising that neither Albuquerque nor Bernalillo County agreed to accept the liability, let alone the maintenance, for the proposed urban trail network. Contrary to the assertion by Ortiz Y Pino, the MRGCD still retains liability.

And if it wasn't enough to pave over Mother Nature, DWT also called for the creation of yet another unelected bureaucracy to run this multi-million dollar boondoggle. If you believe MRGCD taxes are too high now, imagine the cost of a whole new government headed by an unaccountable trail czar with the power to impose sweeping new design regulations on local neighborhoods down to, believe it or not, the acceptable color of a trash can.

Finally, it should be noted that the vast majority of Conservancy ratepayers did not support the DWT Project. The plan to construct multi-surface ditch banks, parking lots and trail heads in local neighborhoods, and a new four lane bridge over Montano, was summarily rejected by participants during the DWT three-day public design workshop in December 2007. The Conservancy Directors heard the results of that three-day workshop loud and clear, as did the Albuquerque Journal. The December 11 headline announced: "Residents Want Ditches Kept as They Are". The workshop's facilitator, UNM Professor Ric Richardson, concurred: "They want to preserve and enhance but not build an urban trail system".

The Conservancy is to be commended for standing up for its constituents against well-funded special interests and big-government cheerleaders. In the discussion of how best to preserve the culture of the past and meet the needs of the future, it is painfully clear that the over-reaching DWT Project was not the solution.

Ortiz Y Pino must know that besides providing critical flood control, the Conservancy currently oversees 1,200 miles of existing ditch trails from Cochiti to the Bosque Del Apache Refuge, is home to the highly acclaimed, much traveled Paseo del Bosque trail, and also co-manages Albuquerque's premier refuge, the Rio Grande Valley State Park. Eliminating Conservancy taxes may sound tempting from the soap box, but given economies of scale, breaking the Conservancy into a thousand smaller pieces will simply tax the public from a thousand new and even more costly directions.

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