



MY TURN

Historic ancient acequia and watershed ecosystem under threat

La Acequia Madre de San Juan Nepomuceño Del Llano is a serene, beautiful stream that teems with trout and transports water from the Rio Santa Barbara near Peñasco to the bountiful farms and ranches of Llano de San Juan. Beyond agriculture, it promotes soil formation and conservation, provides aquatic, avian and terrestrial habitat and is a wildlife movement corridor – while preserving a strong land and water ethic and sense of place, among other ecological, ethnological and economic base values to the community.

Tejada wrote that the acequia was founded by Ms. Catalina Martinez (approximately at the turn of the 18th century) by manually charting its course to the Llano. This was no doubt a monumental effort, which was even more heroic considering that, while she was working on the ditch, she gave birth to her son, José Antonio.

Now, more than 200 years later, this historic, earthen acequia, which serves Llano reliably and is a national treasure, is

marked for demolition. A group of parciantes (members of the Taos Valley Acequia Association) claiming the need for increased efficiency, has proposed and secured partial funding to replace the open earthen stream with a five foot diameter, 0.8-mile plastic pipeline that is to be buried two to three feet beneath a gravel road.

There are many reasons why this is not a good idea. First, the premise for installing the pipeline (at significant cost to taxpayers and parciantes) is poorly reasoned. The efficiency of historic earthen acequias over impermeable channels (such as plastic pipelines) to watersheds and community health has been well documented in Northern New Mexico as a unique eco-cultural legacy. What's more, an analysis of the cost of maintaining the pipeline has yet to be produced. Doña Catalina's legacy proved that hard work prevails in working with nature to produce a sustainable agro-ecosystem.

Second, the draft environmental assessment (EA) of the acequia project issued by the Army Corps

of Engineers (ACOE) was hastily prepared, (obviously following a boilerplate with no regard to the above historical legacies), lacked community input and contains significant inaccuracies. The EA states that the acequia is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and emphasizes that the goal of the project is "rehabilitation." At the same time, the EA also states that the process of rehabilitation should (1) preserve "portions and features of the property which are significant to its historic, architectural and cultural values;" (2) not alter "features and spaces that characterize a property;" (3) "deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced;" (4) replacement of a distinctive feature... shall match the old in design color, texture and... materials;" and (5) "damage to historical materials shall not be used." The proposed pipeline project would violate all of these principles. The ACOE did not provide a careful analysis of the historical significance of the acequia to the ecosystem, nor has it responded to comments submitted concerning

the draft of the EA.

Third, even though minutes of a Taos Valley Acequia Association early meeting indicate that the New Mexico Acequia Commission was tasked with alerting and discussing the project with landowners through which the pipeline will run, they never did so (nor did the ACOE). Consistent with New Mexico acequia law, the association has a right to an easement for conveyance of water and for reasonable maintenance of the acequia. It does not, however, have the right to construct an underground pipeline and road through the landowners' properties. The landowners, who regard the open, earthen acequia and its associated ecosystem as a significant asset to their landholdings, oppose the pipeline project. They are also concerned about the disruption to their property and the decline in quality of life that adding a new road will bring.

Finally, many of the acequia association's members (parciantes) are opposed to the pipeline project. It was initiated by approval of just 16 of the associ-

ation's 200-plus members. Many are concerned about the costs they will bear for construction and the future costs of maintaining the pipeline.

Members of the acequia commission claim that laborers are not available to conduct traditional acequia maintenance. At the same time, they acknowledge that wages they pay for such work are too low. Instead, they choose to saddle their parciantes with significant costs (7.5 percent cost share; under \$200,000) for installing the pipeline, and further have not appraised the parciantes of additional, predictable or potential unforeseen costs associated with pipeline maintenance. All such costs have bearing on water rights.

We can only imagine what Doña Catalina would say about this project.

Gabriel and Kaori Lopez (landowners); Karen Derrick-Davis (landowner); Thomas Lopez (parciante); Louise and Edward Lucero (lessors of parciantes); George, Melba, Raymond and Jose George Maestas (landowners); Jean Nichols (parciante); and Christine Wagner and Scott Kirvan (landowners)

Find common ground in debate on wilderness expansion

JOHN MILES

The recent exchange over proposed additions to the Pecos Wilderness, of which I have been part, raises issues of concern to me.

First, in these debates we sometimes overlook the essence of the wilderness idea, which is that we humans can and must practice restraint in our relationship to nature. We can and must, in a small part of the natural world, let nature be nature, as much as possible. There are many reasons why we should do this: so we have a "baseline" of nature from which to measure, understand, and evaluate the changes we make in it; so we have a place where threatened species can survive, where nature can flourish for, as philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore and others have said, flourishing is mutual and as nature flourishes, so do we; so we can preserve beau-

ty, health and permanence of nature; and so there will be a few places where we, any of us, can escape for a time the rush and roar of modern life.

Second, in Taos, Rio Arriba, and Santa Fe counties, land use debates are very personal, fraught with accusations that one group is "taking" this wilderness land from another. Once, the land proposed to be added to the Pecos Wilderness was Pueblo land, then Spanish land grant, then private land and now U.S. public land. It is part of the commons of the U.S., it belongs to us all, we benefit from it, and we share the responsibility to care for it. While each previous group of "owners" would like exclusive ownership of it today, the outcome of its long history seems to

me to be optimal for our community in the 21st century. We all have a stake in an important part of our land resource and an opportunity to work together for our mutual well-being.

Third, wilderness is a very small part of the whole of the land in the southern Sangre de Cristo mountain region and in the continental U.S. In both contexts it is about 2 percent. The Pecos additions around the edges of the current wilderness only slightly increase the portion of this region that would be protected from development if it were added to the National Wilderness Preservation System. One might think, when listening to the rhetoric in the debate, that vast acreages are involved. This is not so – we would be practicing restraint on development in only a small fraction of our land base, as we are now. And we would be

doing so in an area still roadless, and thus eligible for wilderness protection, after more than four centuries of development and at least a millennium of human presence in the region.

Fourth, communities have legitimate concerns about the threat of wildfire and cultural heritage values of the lands in question, but additional wilderness does not pose an all-or-nothing choice. Proponents of wilderness additions have recognized the need to protect cultural heritage values and included a "cultural heritage special management area" of 14,612 acres in addition to the 20,406 acres of wilderness additions in Taos County. Some cultural and economic values, such as grazing, will continue in wilderness additions where they have been practiced in the past. Investment in wildfire protection must be made

for the human community in the area, but it should be close to that community, not miles away in roadless areas. Mechanical treatment of tens of thousands of acres for wildfire pre-suppression will simply not be affordable or practical. Minimizing human sources of ignition, as wilderness does, will likely be the best we can do to reduce the threat of wildfire.

Finally, as I wrote in a column last February, wilderness is an asset to our community in many ways, economically not the least of them. This is undeniable. As in any choice we make, there will be costs and benefits. If the affected communities are willing and able to compromise and explore options in good faith, we can have our wilderness with its many benefits and protect cultural heritage too.

Miles lives in El Prado.

More must be done to prevent alcohol, drug addiction in Taos

YALE JONES

The New Mexico Legislative Health and Human Services Committee focused on behavioral health and addiction issues at its meeting in Taos Aug. 23. Presenters included Sheriff Jerry Hogrefe, Judge Sarah Backus and a panel of behavioral health providers from Taos and Rio Arriba counties. Virtually all of the presentations addressed what can be done for people already suffering alcohol and drug addiction.

The presenters made a number of points: alcohol and drug addiction in these two counties has reached epidemic proportions. The effects on individuals, families and our communities are devastating. Effective treatment and rehabilitation programs are available, and some remarkable and committed organizations and people are working hard, but on inadequate budgets, to provide it. A medical-social detox facility in Taos is needed. The people served by behavioral health providers are worthwhile human beings who can be restored to recovery and better lives. And above all, much more funding is needed to provide the resources and staff to address the overwhelming need for treatment.

The committee's response? Empathetic, but blunt. They understand the need and wish they could address it, but they can't. No general fund money is available. The governor would surely veto any increase in behavioral health funding. Perhaps, they suggested, the town and county could find a funding vehicle for a detox center. It was clear that the committee knew all of this in advance. I wondered why they even held a session addressing these issues? The

presenters poured out their hearts and surely went away discouraged.

For almost two years I have been the community representative on the Taos County Adult Drug Court Team. Tri County Community Services is the treatment provider of drug court services and they do an excellent job. Not every drug court participant achieves lasting recovery, but enough do to make the effort worthwhile. Our mandate is to accept "high risk (of relapse), high need (of services)" people. Before we accept a person into the program, we learn how they got to where they are. The back stories are heart-breaking: addicted parents or other adults in the home; poverty; unemployment; failure to complete one's education; gang membership; peer pressure to use or drink; the seeming opportunity to escape from a gloomy reality, depression or despair; an attempt to "fill a hole in one's soul;" and ready availability of alcohol, opioids and heroin. Each person has his or her own story.

The committee didn't hear one word about prevention of addiction. Indeed, notwithstanding that in 2015 New Mexico had the second highest drug overdose mortality rate in the nation, there seems to be less emphasis in our state on education and prevention than on treatment of those already addicted. So there is probably no end in sight.

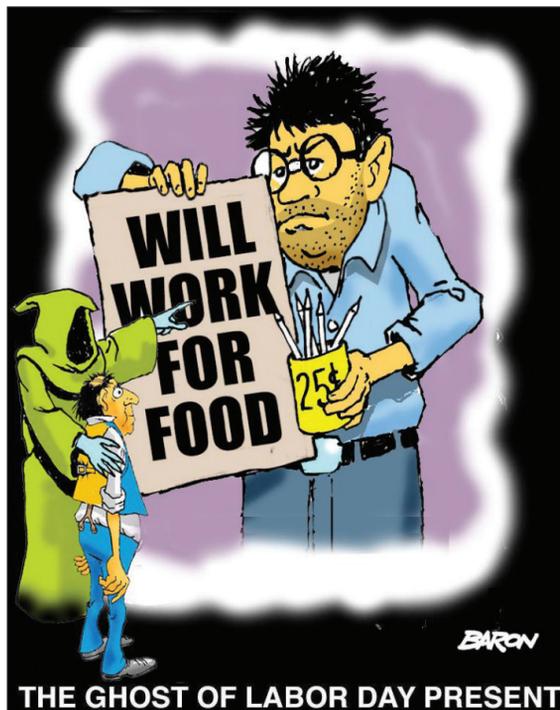
Addiction prevention is not rocket science. There are many resources for communities, parents and schools to proactively reduce drug and alcohol use. See, for example, the recommendations of the

National Institute on Drug Abuse. Likewise, there are many resources for educators. The life skills training (LST) prevention intervention, delivered in seventh-grade classrooms, helps children avoid misusing prescription opioids throughout their teen years. Coupling LST with the strengthening families program for parents and youth 10 to 14 enhances this protection. Finally, character development and education in the schools will help make drug and alcohol abuse irrelevant for young people.

Our state, our community and our schools must make child and adult education a priority. The hours and dollars devoted to standardized tests that don't improve educational outcomes would be better used for life skills, character development and drug prevention education. Yes, such programs will cost the state and our schools money in the short run, but in the long run that expense will be more than offset by reduced costs of treatment and law enforcement. Sadly, the governor has just proposed that public schools cut their spending, notwithstanding her campaign pledge "to protect classroom spending and basic health care for those most in need."

So my message to the governor and legislature is that pats on the head, slogans and nice words are worthless. If they are truly committed to public health, they will fund proactive prevention education, as well as treatment for the already-addicted. Otherwise, the addiction epidemic and associated costs, including the terrible toll on individuals and families, will continue to grow.

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