

## **Acequia restoration under way in Kit Carson Park**

**By J.R. Logan**

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Ben Romero, 17, heaved a heavy-duty hoe Monday (June 8) in a ditch along the northeast corner of Kit Carson Memorial Park. The young Taos native is an assistant crew supervisor for Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, and he and his team had dug out about 50 feet of acequia in their first few hours of work.

Over the next 10 weeks, that crew expects to dig almost 2,000 feet of irrigation ditch in the park that has filled in and become overgrown after years of neglect. The crew will also clean culverts in the park that are almost completely packed with soil.

When finished, park managers expect the acequia system to be able to flood irrigate trees and grass fields in the 19-acre park.

The acequia restoration is part of a bigger effort to beautify the park that includes replacing dead trees and other plants in an area along Paseo del Pueblo. Nearly all of the work is being funded with grants the town sought to supplement its relatively meager parks budget.

“This park needs a lot of help,” Kennebeck says. “It gets used constantly, and our budget is so low that anytime I can find money elsewhere, I try and do it.”

For the acequia and planter work, the town got a \$61,700 cash grant from the New Mexico Youth Conservation Corps Commission.

Officials are touting the project as a major win — not only for the beautification of the park, but also for the preservation of acequia culture in the heart of Taos, plus the employment and training of young locals.

Restoration of the park’s acequias is based, in part, on a 2011 study done for the town that reviewed the condition of acequias in the historic district and offered suggestions on how to improve them.

That study, done by the architectural firm Archinia, said the ditches in the park were “unique” because there were open and lined with grass.

“They are sinuous, wrapping around trees and the form of the landscape, and they seem ‘soft’ ... This ‘softness,’ grassy lining and sinuous nature of these ditches should be preserved, and cottonwood trees along the ditch removed as soon as possible, especially if they are ill.”

In the long term, the report also proposed an “acequia interpretive trail” that would start in the

park and span the historic district. The report suggested the town turn a former pond in the center of the park into a wetland to show off species typical to those environments.

Getting the acequia back in shape is only the first step in getting water. The park is served by the Acequia Madre del Rio Pueblo, which originates on Taos Pueblo before winding its way along the town's northern border and into Ca-on.

The Kit Carson Lateral (the side ditch that serves the park) diverts from the main ditch near the northeast corner of the park. From pueblo lands, the lateral crosses a single property — now mostly overgrown with trees and weeds — before reaching the park.

According to a 1969 hydrographic survey showing water rights holders in the center of town, there are 11 acres in the park that can legally be irrigated by the ditch. Those rights were adjudicated to the New Mexico State Park Commission, which owned and operated the park at the time.

Bobby Jaramillo, mayordomo of the acequia, said Tuesday (June 9) the park could receive water if its infrastructure is restored. Kennebeck said the town has stayed current on its ditch dues — typically a requirement for any ditch user to receive water.

Kennebeck said the restoration of the acequia will have very practical and economic benefits as well. Years ago, Kennebeck said park staff regularly used the ditch to irrigate that park's trees and grass fields, and it plans to do so again.

That could take a bite out of what the town currently pays to pump water from a well to water the park. In fact, according to town records, crews pumped just under 10 million gallons during fiscal 2012-2013.

If the town still controls the water rights adjudicated to the park in 1969, it has a right to divert nearly 9 million gallons annually off the ditch, though that diversion depends largely on the actual amount of water that is available in any given year.

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**— Steve Kennebeck, Town of Taos Facilities Director**

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Katharine Egli

Leon Gallegos, left, and Teo Cantu with the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps dig out an acequia in Kit Carson Park, Monday (June 8).

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Katharine Egli

Town of Taos Facilities Director Steve Kennebeck stands outside the park.