

## Water Matters

# Deal sweetened for aquifer mapping in Taos County

By Meg Scherch Peterson

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When it was time for Trudy Valerio Healy to accept *mil gracias* for the Healy Foundation's latest gift to UNM-Taos, she looked out over the audience, brushed aside her iconic black bangs and spent her impromptu speech thanking everyone in the room.

It was classic Healy. And the gathering of some 75 *mayordomos*, *acequia parciantes*, land grant heirs, UNM-Taos administrators and local politicians loved it.

The announcement of the Senator Carlos R. Cisneros and Healy Foundation Archives Center earlier this month at the Taos County commission chambers paves the way for a local repository for current and historical documents and media related to *acequias* and land grants.

Healy described her personal relationship with water and the land, recalling a phrase of her father's that she will never forget: "It all begins with the melting snow." In his time, Juan I. Valerio served as a Taos County commissioner — and for 40 years — the *mayordomo* of an *acequia* in Ranchos.

Later that afternoon, I had the chance to chat with Healy about her remarkable 11-year tenure on the state's Water Trust Board, the foundation's substantial support for the Taos County Aquifer Mapping Project and the latest project — tentatively titled the Healy Collaborative Groundwater Network.

## Healy's history

We plant ourselves on a bench in the shaded garden outside her Rancho Milagro Collection gallery on Bent Street. Ed Healy ambles over, offering chocolate. Daughter Felice Knox recounts the time she gave a bear fetish to Hillary Clinton. And gallery director Alicia Waltz explains the numerical tattoo on her arm: "It's the derivation of the ground water flow equation. No, really," she says, laughing.

As for Healy, she confides she's not as active in water or politics as she used to be and spends more time these days watching her twin grandsons race cars. But sometimes the past gives the present a deeper meaning. "I was on the transition team for Gov. Richardson when he first came into power," she says. "In 2003, he appointed me to the Water Trust Board. But when I first came on, I was always afraid what I said would come out stupid." When confronted with all the jargon associated with water law, she confesses, "The only phrase that kept repeating in my mind was, 'See Sally run.'" Eventually, she would serve as treasurer. At one point, she was the surface water representative on the board — one of five appointees of the governor out of a 16-member board. "I used to tell people, 'Even when you spit, I'm your representative,'" she said.

She's most proud of affecting water policy, particularly with respect to the regional water plans. "In the beginning, [the plans] were little more than a wish list," she said. "But we worked to ensure that any project presented to the Water Trust Board had to check the box that the project had been included in the region's water plan before it would even be considered for funding."

Back then, too, *acequias* and people in the north in general weren't taken seriously, she says. "Some people on the board didn't know what an *acequiawas*."

## **Water funds**

Working together with key players, including local water activist Ron Gardiner, she helped to form the Acequia Project Fund. "It took years to get that done. The Healy Foundation put a couple hundred thousand dollars into it," Healy said.

The fund is formally titled the "Irrigation Works Construction Fund," which has an annual balance of \$1.9 million for all of the *acequia* rehabilitation programs and can provide up to 90 percent funding.

Trudy once worked side by side with "a La Raza kind of guy," former state representative Manuel Trujillo. As she tells it, he spoke forcefully — maybe a little too forcefully — on behalf of the *acequia* tradition and traditional people. "I took him aside," Healy said, "And I told him, 'You can't fight for the *acequiassounding* like a river. You have to sound like an *acequia* .' I was quoting my dad."

From *acequias* to aquifers, the foundation's support for the aquifer mapping program — one of several research programs at New Mexico Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources — began in 2010 under Dr. Peggy Johnson, who was then program manager and principal senior hydrogeologist.

According to mapping program manager Stacy Timmons, the foundation contributed \$450,000 over the past six years. The bulk of that funding supported hydrogeologic research in Taos County. But funding also supported projects in other areas of New Mexico, including La Cienega in Santa Fe County, Union County and Socorro/Catron counties at San Agustin Plains.

## **A look ahead**

Sometime this fall, the final study of the mapping project, "Hydrogeology of the Southern Taos Valley," by Johnson and principal geologist Dr. Paul Bauer is expected to be published. An overview was presented to the Taos County Commission on June 28.

"We have the best-mapped aquifer in the state," Healy said. It's a sentiment proudly echoed by local Taose-os who are knowledgeable about water issues. Timmons said in a telephone interview that because of the foundation's support, the bureau was able to pump thousands of dollars into mapping the aquifers of Taos County. "The resources we put into Taos County far exceed what we will be able to do throughout the state," Healy continued.

As Healy and I wrap up our conversation, music from Taos Plaza beckons. Her daughter hands me a copy of the newest proposal. In fact, the ink is barely dry on an agreement between the foundation and the bureau for the Healy Collaborative Groundwater Network, slated to kick off this fiscal year. It will initiate a statewide groundwater level monitoring network. New data will be integrated with multiple "messy" data sets that already exist in order to develop functional, digital aquifer maps region by region. The foundation's contribution is \$320,000.

I wonder whether this new statewide approach includes any additional projects for Taos County. Healy assures me they'll be looking at the groundwater dynamics of the Sunshine Valley north of Questa and will continue to monitor targeted wells in Questa and Taos Valley.

Ed Healy offers a final piece of chocolate. I'm thinking, "What a sweet deal for Taos."

***Peterson has published numerous features, interviews and essays in a variety of publications. A retired principal and teacher, she writes about conservation issues, nature and birding from her home along the R'o Grande.***



**Meg Scherch Peterson**



**Trudy Valerio Healy has long been involved in water issues in Northern New Mexico. She was also the recipient of the 2016 New Mexico Earth Science Achievement Award, presented to her by the Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources Jan. 28, 2016, in the rotunda of the Santa Fe Roundhouse.**

**Courtesy photo**