

Commissioners and mayordomos grapple with maintenance of acequias in Taos

By Cody Hooks

The Taos News, 4/8/2017

A haphazard pile of shovels and rakes stuck out of the corner of Bobby Jaramillo's truck bed.

It was a Saturday morning when Jaramillo and seven other workers gathered in a parking lot on the north end of Taos for the time-honored tradition of cleaning the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo de Taos.

Jaramillo, the mayordomo, was joined by a few *parciantes*, those who own water rights. Taos Mayor Dan Barrone and Councilor Fritz Hahn also were in the group, along with a few people from the town who just wanted to see this urban acequia revitalized, moving water as it was intended. The town is eager to get more people irrigating in the traditional way.

The group began working near the boundary of Taos Pueblo, making their way down the tight, overgrown ditch, shoveling out leaves, cutting down large, overhanging branches and pulling dirt out of clogged culverts.

Like its more rural counterparts, the Acequia Madre is in a time of transition.

As on-the-ground water managers — acequia commissioners and mayordomos — shift their focus from a long-running water rights battle to grappling with the challenges of maintaining the valley's historic water systems into the future. That burden is increasingly falling on a population of irrigators that is only getting older. Knowledge of the water systems is fading, and fewer water rights-holders are paying dues to maintain the acequias, leaving a small number of people to foot the bill.

The Taos Valley Acequia Association has spent the last four years navigating and negotiating the Abeyta adjudication, a resolution to the decades-old water rights dispute between Taos Pueblo members, other Taos County residents and the state. The association is now looking to chart a path forward. As association President Palemon Martinez recently said, if irrigators are going to keep water in use in the valley, "It's critical we all work together."

Acequias are a centuries-old system of harnessing and sharing irrigation water in arid places. The technology, governance and culture was brought by the Spanish from the Middle East and the Iberian Peninsula to the Southwest, where the ideas were mixed with Native American systems of water sharing.

The irrigation system's purpose was simple: survival. But it is also an important part of the region's past that many want to see preserved.

The April 1 cleaning of the Acequia Madre del Río Pueblo de Taos was the most recent stab at a three-year effort to revitalize a portion of the 30 miles of urban acequias in the town of Taos. In 2015, the town joined with the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps to repair a lateral ditch that brings water to Kit Carson Park.

Last year, students spent a semester mapping acequias throughout the valley.

Over the last few months, the Taos Valley Acequia Association has organized gatherings of the seven stream systems in the valley.

A few dozen people showed up at one such gathering April 2 to share their thoughts and brainstorm potential solutions for problems facing the area's oldest infrastructure.

The meetings are an effort to "hear what people need so we can envision a future together," said Sylvia Rodríguez, a scholar and an outreach coordinator with the association.

Chief among the concerns is the dwindling participation of *parciantes*, who are meant to show up to the annual cleaning, or *limpia*, and membership meeting, in addition to paying dues. If *parciantes* don't show up for a cleaning, it's hard to maintain the integrity of a ditch.

"If they'd show up as *parciantes*, we could get more done," Jaramillo told *The Taos News*.

Other acequia leaders echoed that sentiment. "You don't have as many people as you used to," one *parciantes* said.

Record keeping also is becoming a critical part of maintaining the water systems. As families transfer property to their descendants, the parcels of land and their water rights are divvied up. But official records with acequias, along with town, county and state offices, don't always reflect that. As a result, the *parciantes* rosters are out of date.

In some cases, property has changed hands so many times and water rights exercised so infrequently that newcomers, ignorant of the ditches, have built houses right on top of acequia infrastructure.

Acequia commissions face other threats to rights of way, as well, such as fences.

With so many short-term rentals and second homes in the town, Hahn said, "People not knowing about acequias ... is a huge problem."

Several *parciantes* at last week's meeting said the acequias should take a more active role in reaching out to educate the real estate community and other people about the basics of the water system — and each acequia has to take on the task of cleaning up its *parciantes* rosters.

That means the hard, unpaid and often unappreciated work of sifting through records at various offices, knocking on doors and mounting campaigns to bring water rights-holders back into the fold.

"It comes from within," said Oliva Romo, communications and outreach coordinator with the New Mexico Acequia Association. "You're the ones irrigating. You're the ones raising your grandkids" on the land.

A version of this story first appeared in The Taos News, a sister publication of The Santa Fe New Mexican.