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Rio Grande Trail Master Plan: Threading Partnerships

Chapter 4 Draft

Overview

As the mileage of the Rio Grande Trail grows, and new segments are added outside of state park properties, a cohesive approach to oversight, management, and maintenance of the trail as a singular asset will be increasingly important. The following chapter provides guidance for trail oversight based on the unique characteristics of the Rio Grande Trail alignment, its range of trail types, range of user groups, and the institutional landscape in New Mexico. These unique characteristics include:

- **Long-distance:** More than 400 miles of trail are proposed within the preferred alignment.
- **Historic significance:** Rio Grande Trail alignment follows a 1000-year-old trade route.
- **Incremental development:** Segments will be completed or designated as available, rather than in a continuous linear fashion and gaps will exist between designated segments.
- **Multiple land owners and managers:** Segments will vary in land owner and manager, ranging from state parks to NMDOT rights-of-way to irrigation district easements, and many others.
- **Federal agency participation:** 27,508,382 acres of land, approximately 35% of the state is owned by a federal agency, including Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Forest Service, and US Fish and Wildlife.¹
- **Undefined resources:** While many potential funding sources exist for the Rio Grande Trail, there is no dedicated source of funding for trail construction or ongoing operations and maintenance in existence to-date.
- **Fiscal stewardship:** Public funding for trails is limited, as is the case with any public improvement.
- **Range of Users:** Many different types of users will enjoy and explore the trail in their own ways. User groups include:



Local walkers and runners- includes walkers, hikers, joggers, and dog walkers.



Through hikers- hikers travelling end-to-end on a long-distance trail.



Local Bicyclists- commuter or sport cyclists typically traveling (for a single day) on road bikes or touring bikes with narrower tires.



Section hikers- hikers travelling along a partial segment of a long-distance trail (duration may vary from a couple of days to a week).



Mountain bikers- recreational cyclists typically traveling on mountain bikes, fat bikes, or touring bikes specifically designed for soft-surface trails for a single day.



Through touring cyclists- cyclists traveling long distances on road bikes or touring bikes carrying varying amounts of gear and supplies to support their trip.

¹ Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data. Congressional Research Service Report. March 3, 2017.



Equestrians- users traveling by horseback.



Bike Packers- Cyclists traveling long distances on mountain bikes or touring bikes equipped for soft-surface trails carrying varying amounts of gear and supplies to support their trip.

Pursuing National Trail Designation

Consideration: The Rio Grande Trail non-profit could pursue a National Recreation Trail (NRT) designation (see Appendix XX for an evaluation of varying national trail designations).

National trail designations, such as National Recreation Trails, National Scenic Trails, and National Historic trail:

- elevate the national profile of the trail,
- streamline coordination between different managing agencies,
- prioritize the trail for federal funding and maintenance,
- bring tourism to rural and urban areas,
- spark interest from volunteers,
- and facilitate communication with other National Trails through the Partnership for National Trails Systems.

The National Recreation Trail designation could be particularly applicable to the Rio Grande Trail because of the more accessible federal approval process, flexibility for many different types of trail designs, and aligned goals. NRT designation specifically recognizes trails that link communities to recreational opportunities on public land and in local parks. As it begins to take shape, the Rio Grande Trail will likely embody the criteria for NRT designation: open to the public for at least 10 years, well-maintained and managed, in compliance with applicable land use and environmental law, and supported by all land owners whose property the trail crosses.

inset box: Applying for National Recreation Trail Designation

Nationwide, there are over 1,300 NRTs, ranging from less than a mile to 485 miles in length. They are authorized by the National Trails System Act of 1968. These existing regional and local trails are approved by either the Secretary of Agriculture or the Secretary of the Interior. Unlike other national trail designations, they do not need the approval of Congress. If they decide to pursue designation, the Bureau of Land Management's New Mexico office could serve as an in-state resource for navigating the process to apply for designation. The application and approval process happen on a yearly cycle, starting each November. The application can be completed online and includes basic information about the trail and sponsoring agency, as well as written consent from all property owners whose property the trail crosses.²

² The National Recreation Trails Database. NRT Applications and updates. Accessed 4/27/18. <http://americantrails.org/NRTDatabase/applicantLogin.php>

inset box: Relationship with other National Trails in New Mexico

El Camino Real Historic Trail

The El Camino Real Historic Trail is one of New Mexico's most important cultural artifacts. It tells a story of three centuries of cross cultural trade and commerce using different modes of travel. The 404-mile route from El Paso, Texas to San Juan Pueblo was designated a National Historic Trail in 1993 and added to the National Trails system in October 2000. In Southern New Mexico, the El Camino Real Historic Trail follows a similar route to the Rio Grande Trail. However, in Santo Domingo Pueblo, the El Camino Real Historic Trail diverges from the Rio Grande and continues up the Santa Fe River. The Rio Grande Trail will similarly highlight New Mexico's unique history, with more of an emphasis on active modes of transportation and the natural environment. The two trails will work in tandem to promote New Mexican tourism along the river corridor, leverage federal resources, and offer excellent recreational opportunities to New Mexican residents.

Continental Divide Trail

Founded in 1978, the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDT) extends for 770 miles through some of New Mexico's most spectacular natural and historic landscapes. It follows the Continental Divide across the U.S., running north/south through western New Mexico. The Continental Divide Trail Coalition (CDTC) (and before that the Continental Divide Trail Association) coordinates trail management, in partnership with National Forest Service and New Mexico recreation and conservation groups. The two trails offer different ways for people to recreate in New Mexico. The CDT provides a rugged, backcountry experience for users, with an emphasis on conservation and self-reliance. The RGT will offer a more accessible way for people to explore the state, with less challenging terrain, closer proximity to cities, and developed amenities. The RGT team seeks to learn from the CDTC's decades of trail planning and management experience and work together to promote state tourism and funding for trails.

Establishing a Governance Structure

Establish a Rio Grande Trail Nonprofit

Recommendation: The Rio Grande Trail Commission and State Parks Division should establish a non-profit that will play a leading role in the state's efforts to create the Rio Grande Trail.

The State Parks Department would help establish the Rio Grande Trail non-profit by filing the appropriate paper work and provide an initial round of funding. The Rio Grande Trail Commission would hire the first non-profit staff who would work to further develop the organization. Another option to start the Rio Grande Trail non-profit is to invite an existing non-profit to host the Rio Grande Trail non-profit as a program before the group branches out on its own. NM Legislature House Bill- 563 may need to be amended to outline how the Commission will work with the trail non-profit.

The benefits of a Rio Grande Trail Non-Profit include:

- **Collaboration:** Trail non-profits are uniquely positioned to collaborate with the multiple stakeholder groups who are interested in the statewide trail: local communities, city and state officials, pueblos, government agencies, and tourists.
- **Accountability:** Particularly when multiple agencies manage the land, trail non-profits are a mission-driven outside force, dedicated to moving the project forward.

- **Advocacy and Education:** Trail organizations recruit and work with volunteers, build momentum for the trail, and raise money, public awareness, and community support.
- **Common ground:** Trail nonprofits are particularly savvy at balancing the needs of different trail user constituencies, such as hikers and mountain bikers. They offer a way for people from different user groups across the state to work together around common goals.
- **Inclusive:** Trail non-profits provide an inclusive approach to trail governance. Anyone who is passionate about the mission is encouraged to get involved in a variety of ways.

Rio Grande Trail Non-Profit Role

- Serve as 501c3 fundraising arm to raise money to fill the gaps in public funding.
- Advocate for public funding.
- Work collaboratively with the New Mexico Department of Tourism to create a promotional program for the trail.
- Lead volunteer recruitment and management.
- Develop and lead supportive programming, such as a “Gateway Community” program and larger community events.
- Work with Rio Grande Trail Commission, State Parks Division, Bureau of Land Management, National Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife through an overarching Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to fund, build, and manage the trail. This MOU will outline how the different entities agree to work together.
- Work with smaller individual land managers, such as cities, counties, and private land owners through individual arrangements.
- Work with the Rio Grande Trail Commission to designate trail segments and collaborate with land managers to incorporate new segments into the trail system.
- Serve as a one-stop-shop for businesses and other groups seeking to hold events on the trail.

Rio Grande Trail Non-Profit Structure

The Board of Director, staff, and important partners will create a system of checks and balances to govern the organization and trajectory of the Rio Grande Trail. The Rio Grande Trail non-profit will serve as the advocacy, fundraising, and community-facing arm of the Rio Grande Trail, while the Rio Grande Trail Commission will hold political power and link to state government.

- **Board of Directors**
 - The Rio Grande Trail non-profit will need a Board of Directors, as required for all 502c3 non-profits. The Board should include members who represent many different stakeholder groups and interests: environmental, social, health, political, local trail chapters, native Americans, and more. The Board should include a member that serves as a liaison between the non-profit and the Rio Grande Trail Commission.
- **Staff**
 - Paid staff are essential for the success of the Rio Grande Trail non-profit. At minimum staff positions must include an Executive Director and Coordinators to manage communication, advocacy, fundraising, trail building, volunteer recruitment, and event planning. The Board of Directors must decide whether to recruit regional coordinators to handle multiple functions with a regional specialization or take a statewide approach with coordinators who specialize in only one function of the trail non-profit, such as a statewide Volunteer Coordinator.

Successful Trail Non-Profits

The Arizona Trail Association, Colorado Trail Foundation, and Palmetto Conservation Foundation are examples of the many 501c3 trail non-profits that successfully work with government agencies, local officials, and community members to build and maintain long-distance trails. These examples provide “lessons learned” for the future Rio Grande Trail non-profit.

Arizona Trail Association

The ATA illustrates a successful transfer of governance from government bureaus to a trail non-profit, as well how the mission shifts overtime from construction to maintenance and promotion.

The Arizona Trail Association (ATA) was founded in 1994 to advocate for the trail, provide route info, organize volunteers, identify water and resupply points, and raise money. The Arizona Trail is governed by a partnership between the ATA and government bureaus, led by the USDA Forest Service. At the beginning of the work building the trail, the government agencies held the majority of the responsibility, but over time much has been transferred to the ATA. The partnership between non-profit, state, and federal agencies is strategic and powerful.³ The ATA now controls the state trail funding and manages the Trail Steward, who leads the development of the trail. The ATA has the lead role in managing, maintaining, and funding the trail, as the mission has shifted from construction to maintenance and promotion.

Colorado Trail

The Colorado Trail Foundation provides a great example of how a trail non-profit can work closely with one main public partner to build and operate the trail. The CTF also highlights the power of leveraging private sector donations for a trail.

The Colorado Trail is governed by a partnership between the Colorado Trail Foundation (CTF) and the USDA Forest Service outlined by a 2005 Memorandum of Understanding. The CTF is responsible for trail development, maintenance, and continued improvement of the trail corridor, while the Forest Service is ultimately the decision maker for analysis, construction, restoration, and maintenance in accordance with their regulations. The Forest Service has delegated much of the actual work, but still maintains overall authority. The two organizations maintain a close working relationship.⁴

In contrast to most long-distance trails, the CTF is primarily funded by private sources, such as the Gates Foundation, REI, family foundations, Colorado businesses, and individual donors. Their fundraising success is a result of the CTF’s trail branding, creative donor cultivation, Adopt-a-Trail Program, and numerous grant applications.

Palmetto Trail

The Palmetto Conservation Foundation (PCF) is a great example of how a non-profit can build a trail across land owned by many different groups, including small, private land owners. Additionally, PCF’s work coordinating trail maintenance and their partnership with AmeriCorps provide guidance for the Rio Grande Trail non-profit as they establish a statewide volunteer and maintenance program.

PCF spearheads the Palmetto Trail planning, development, branding and communications. The trail is developed largely through publicly-owned lands, on public rights-of-way, and through easements for recreational use, including rail-trail conversions and access to protected lands. Where that is not possible, PCF relies on MOUs as a way to reach agreement with a private property owner for trail access. Major trail

³ Interview with Matt Nelson. Executive Director, Arizona Trail Association. 8/18/17

⁴ 2005 MOU between the Forest Service and the Colorado Trail Foundation

management partners include the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, and the US Forest Service.

Most maintenance is undertaken by the local entity that owns or operates the trail segment of the trail. PCF plays a major role in tracking maintenance needs and in organizing and leading volunteer maintenance efforts. This includes ongoing partnerships with AmeriCorps, and the establishment of the Palmetto Conservation Corps, a trail-based state AmeriCorps program.

Roles of public agencies and other trail partners

Rio Grande Trail Commission

Recommendation: Provide a collaborative link between the non-profit and state government and serve as an internal political champion for the trail, by promoting the trail effort to policy makers and agency staff. The Rio Grande Trail Commission should officially designate trail segments, as recommended by the Rio Grande Trail non-profit. See the “Trail Designation Section” on page 11.

The governor-appointed Rio Grande Trail Commission over saw the creation of the Rio Grande Trail Master Plan. Now that the plan is complete, the Rio Grande Trail Commission should **work in tandem with the non-profit to establish sustainable, positive relationships with local jurisdictions and to identify mutually beneficial partnerships.** The Commission should support the non-profit by hiring the first staff and ensuring the group has enough funding to begin their work. With representation from leadership across the state, the Trail Commission is well-positioned to coordinate local partnerships. For example, the Trail Commission may be able to connect the Rio Grande Trail effort with an MPO that can prioritize Transportation Alternatives funding for projects that are along the trail route or ensure that the Rio Grande Trail projects, routing, and goals are incorporated into relevant county and regional plans.

City, County Governments

Recommendation: Promote, maintain, and provide amenities along their section of trail.

Support from local city and county governments is essential for ensuring the Rio Grande Trail is continuous, well-maintained, and widely-used. Officials should seek to implement overarching trail design and management guidelines, while maintaining local character. Local city and county governments should establish partnership agreements and clear lines of communication, such as a Memorandum of Understanding, with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit in order to coordinate around trail maintenance, volunteer needs, funding, and promotion of the trail. City and county governments should include building, maintaining, and promoting the Rio Grande Trail into their long-range transportation and comprehensive plans.

Work group input: (short stories of local success stories: Truth or Consequences development of Healing Waters Trail; Las Cruces resolution for trail designation; and Albuquerque development of Bosque trail)

Regional Planning Agencies: Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), Council of Governments (COGs), and Regional Planning Authorities (RPOs)

Recommendation: Fund construction of the trail, promote the trail at the regional level and ensure that the trail is incorporated into relevant planning documents, such as Long-Range Transportation Plans and Unified Planning Work Programs.

Regional planning institutions have access to federal and state transportation funds that can be allocated for trail construction. These funds should be used to construct the trail through local jurisdictions. Each regional institution should seek to create a distinctive, complete Rio Grande Trail across their region to provide an

amenity for their constituents, bring in tourists, and spur economic development. In Florida, the MPO Chairs Coordinating Committee has been instrumental in prioritizing and funding trail projects across nine counties and seven MPOs⁵. This type of regional coordination benefits a project of this magnitude.

Regional Irrigation Districts

Recommendation: Provide right of way easements, provide resources for trail construction and maintenance, incorporate the trail into relevant planning documents and capital improvement programs.

Regional irrigation districts manage extensive networks of irrigation canals, ditches, and levees. These undeveloped linear corridors provide a unique opportunity for trail development. The most important roles of the districts will be to coordinate with the Rio Grande Trail nonprofit and commission to establish easements for trail alignment and collaborate in trail design, construction, and maintenance that is compatible with irrigation infrastructure and the agency's needs for ongoing maintenance access.

State Government

Recommendation: Partner closely with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit by funding trail construction, promoting the trail at the state level.

The State Parks Division has a key role as an early Rio Grande Trail land manager, as most of the already designated segments are on their land. Through this position as an early adopter, State Parks can lead by example by demonstrating how other jurisdictions should approach Rio Grande Trail designation. State Parks should be party to a Memorandum of Understanding with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit and federal agencies to determine how they will work together to fund, build, and maintain the trail. State Parks and New Mexico Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department should partner with the Tourism Department to conduct a statewide marketing effort. The Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department should continue to convene the Rio Grande Trail Commission meetings and serve as an important liaison to other state agencies, such as the New Mexico Department of Transportation and the Department of Health. The New Mexico Department of Health should promote the trail as an active transportation facility and analyze health and demographic trends along the RGT Corridor.

Federal Government

Recommendation: Designate existing trails and construct new trail segments along the proposed Rio Grande Trail alignment and collaborate closely with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit about funding, maintenance, volunteer recruitment, and trail promotion.

The National Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management will be essential partners for constructing and maintaining the Rio Grande Trail. They should establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that outlines how they will work with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit to build and maintain the trail. The MOU should outline that the federal agencies will set aside staff time and resources to support the Rio Grande Trail.

Tribal Governments

Recommendation: Continue to keep the Pueblos apprised about the trail efforts through both Tribal Consultation at the State Agency Level and presentations to specific requests from tribal governments.

As neighboring land owners, tribal governments will remain a partner in dialogue about Rio Grande Trail development and use.

⁵ <http://tbarta.com/en/chairs-coordinating-committee/about/chairs-coordinating-committee>

Non-Profits

Recommendation: Fellow non-profits, such as New Mexico Bike Summit and the Southern New Mexico Trail Alliance, should partner with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit by cross-promoting programming and sharing best practices for trail advocacy in New Mexico.

Advocacy groups with aligned interests in trails, conservation, the Rio Grande River, and community development should partner with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit to coordinate marketing and lobbying efforts and to support events. Collaboration strategies include sharing initiatives through group communication channels, holding coordination meetings, and potentially jointly organizing an event or other action. The proposed Bi-Annual Rio Grande Trail Summit is a great opportunity for non-profits and other trail partners to gather, learn from one another, and coordinate for the years ahead.

Local Businesses

Recommendation: Contribute funding and/or volunteer with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit or other trail partner.

Businesses who seek to show they are invested in the community should contribute financially to building the trail or by volunteering their time. High-profile, well-designed trails spur economic development and boost quality of life, which brings direct benefits to the regional business community. Businesses should consider participating in the proposed Adopt-a-Trail program to help keep a specific section of trail clean and maintained. By Adopting a Trail, they get state-wide philanthropic publicity that will be directly beneficial to their community reputation.

Volunteers

Recommendation: Attend events, assist with trail maintenance, and advocate on behalf of the Rio Grande Trail.

A strong contingent of dedicated volunteers is essential for the Rio Grande Trail to become a reality. Building, maintaining, and promoting an almost 400-mile trail requires dedication and hard work from communities and individuals across the state. Volunteers are invited to help in as small or large a role as they wish. The Rio Grande Trail non-profit will create and maintain a streamlined volunteer portal on the trail website as a one-stop-shop for people interested in getting involved. Volunteers can help by:

- communicating with an elected official on behalf of the trail,
- sharing information on social media,
- attending a trail clean-up or maintenance event,
- assisting with non-profit administrative tasks,
- or stepping into a leadership role with the Rio Grande Trail non-profit.

Neighboring States

Recommendation: Continue to partner with the Rio Grande Trail, New Mexico State Parks, and groups along the state border to connect their Rio Grande Trail segments to the New Mexico portion.

Trail advocates and public officials in Colorado and Texas have both expressed interest in linking their Rio Grande Trail segments with New Mexico. In Texas, the Paso del Norte Health Foundation is collaborating with trail stakeholders to build a connecting segment. New Mexico's Bureau of Land Management is an important liaison for connecting with Colorado trails in the north.

Trail Segment Designation

Current Designation Process

Rio Grande Trail segments are currently designated according to the “Process for Interim Designation of Segments of the Rio Grande Trail” passed by the Rio Grande Trail Commission in 2017. The application process for designation is as follows:

- Landowner and/or land manager submits a request for designation to the RGT Commission.
 - Request includes:
 - Location
 - How the proposed segment supports the vision of the RGT;
 - Evidence of public support for RGT designation;
 - Accessibility of the segment to the public and user groups;
 - Ease with which the trail can readily be incorporated into the system;
 - Evidence that all necessary environmental impact studies and cultural surveys have been completed and negative impacts addressed;
 - Evidence of adequate capacity of landowner or land manager to maintain and manage the segment;
 - Identification of how public safety concerns will be addressed
 - Documentation of safe, sustainable trail design
- Landowner and/or land manager presents to the Commission, responds to public comment, and follows up with a written submittal.
- Written submittals from the landowner and/or land manager would be reviewed by a designated working group (or possibly a subcommittee of the Alignment and Design working groups members) for review and ranking according to a point system developed for that purpose based on the items identified above.
- The results of the review would be submitted at a subsequent RGT Commission meeting for consideration. Segments adequately meeting the above characteristics would be recommended for designation by the RGT Commission.

Future Designation Process

Recommendation: The designation process will be managed by the Rio Grande Trail non-profit, which will make recommendations to the Rio Grande Trail Commission for review and consideration for approval.

After the creation of the Rio Grande Trail non-profit, the Rio Grande Trail Commission should incorporate the group into the segment designation process, while continuing to give final approval. The non-profit should work with the individual land owners to put together the designation proposal then bring a list of recommended segments to quarterly Commission meetings for final approval. NM Legislature House Bill- 563 will need to be amended to include this role for the trail non-profit in the Rio Grande trail designation process. Currently the Rio Grande Trail holds sole responsibility for defining and designating trail segments.

Land Manager Liability

As sovereign entities, local governments are protected by additional limitations on liability for injuries occurring on government-owned property. In New Mexico, private land owners who allow the trail to pass through their land are not held liable for those using their land for the purposes of hunting, fishing, hiking, or other recreational activities. By allowing access to their land, they are not agreeing to maintain the trail or issuing any

assurance that their land is safe.⁶ This statute protection will encourage private land holders to allow the trail to pass through their land.

Long-term Trail Access

Recommendation: Provide optional conservation provisions for Rio Grande trail easements. These protections should be available for interested land owners, but not a required component of trail designation on private land.

As the Rio Grande Trail partners work to build and link together a continuous trail across the state, it will be important to consider how the trail corridor will be protected over time. Some trails, such as the Palmetto Trail, do not prioritize legally protecting the trail corridor from development because it can deter property owners from agreeing to allow the trail to pass through their land. They prioritize continuity over conservation, in the short term, by using less restricted trail easements.

When possible, however, a conservation easement can be used to protect the trail for future generations by for guaranteeing the trail can exist in perpetuity. Land owners may choose to donate a conservation easement, while others will require negotiation for tax benefits. The New Mexico Land Conservancy primarily uses this legal tool in their work.⁷

Promoting the Vision

Though the Rio Grande Trail effort is just getting underway, great strides have been made to develop a unified branding and marketing strategy. Local officials, adventure enthusiasts, and other community members are starting to recognize “red chili” color and local flora and fauna that demark official RGT materials. Momentum is starting, but intentional, creative methods are required to interest people in using the trail and devoting time to make the vision a reality. At this early, developmental stage of the Rio Grande Trail, promotion must focus on the existing trail segments, as well as the long-term vision for a cross-state trail.

This section will offer trail promotion recommendations towards three targeted outcomes that balance those short and long-term priorities: trail usage, “friendraising” and fundraising. Trail usage is about getting people out using the trail and ensuring they have a positive experience. “Friendraising” covers building partnerships and recruiting volunteers. Finally, fundraising encompasses seeking grants and sponsor dollars to the support the trail non-profit, fund trail development, and pay for trail maintenance. Here’s a short list of promotional recommendations for the RGT

- Establish a Gateway Community Program to promote the stories of small towns along the trail, bring them economic benefits, and involve them in planning for programming and events.
- Establish the RGT as the conduit connecting communities, local and state destinations, geographies, health, quality of life, and economic vitality in New Mexico.
- Continue to develop the trail website as an up-to-date source of information about the RGT.
- Develop marketing campaigns designed to solicit donations to the trail effort and to recruit volunteers.
- Promote the Rio Grande Trail as a complement and linkage to the other long-distance trails: El Camino Real National Historic Trail and the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail

⁶ [NM Stat § 17-4-7 \(2016\)](#)

⁷New Mexico Land Conservancy. “Introduction to Conservation Easements.” http://www.nmlandconservancy.org/nm.php/conservation_easements/ce_info/ce_introduction

Trail Usage

A good trail will market itself over time, but new ones require marketing and promotion to highlight experiences offered on the trail. As the Rio Grande Trail begins to take shape, branding and marketing will be essential to get people out enjoying the trail segments that already exist. A strong, identifiable, positive public perception of the trail will build support for ongoing efforts to complete the trail across the whole state.

Trail Branding

Recommendation: Continue to develop a unified brand that is pervasive across different aspects of the trail—from promotional materials to wayfinding signage to the look and feel of trail heads. (immediate)

Branding is a widely used term to describe the perception of a product or service in a target audience's mind. For a trail, a brand includes user experience, logo, signage, purpose, safety, comfort, programming, funding, sponsors, and supporters. Everything from how and email is written to the attitude of a person answering the phone reflects a brand.

For a long-distance trail that links many different trails and systems, each with their own alternative names, creating a **unified overarching brand is essential for building awareness and for user navigability**. The Pacific Crest Trail is an excellent example of unified branding done well and cohesively over thousands of miles of trail. The PCT adds their logo and signs along the route according to very specific design guidelines but does not replace their local names. The PCT uses “reassurance markers” (logos on trees or signs) at intersections to avoid replacing existing wayfinding where ever possible.

Trail branding is off to a strong start. The Rio Grande Trail master planning process has convened several stakeholders working groups, virtual open houses, and other public engagement events. The tone and content of these conversations is the beginning of the Rio Grande Trail Brand. The word cloud below highlights what people are saying about the Rio Grande trail creation effort. The Rio Grande Trail Commission has also approved a signature “look and feel” for the Rio Grande trail materials. The chosen color pallet, typology, and signature flora and fauna designs are attractive and instantly recognizable. Branded promotional materials are available for use on the project website: <http://www.riograndetrailnm.com> .

Recommendation: Develop and maintain a consistent online presence through the trail website, social media, and relevant trail apps. (immediate)

The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should continue the Rio Grande Trail website established through the master planning process. The URL purchased through the NM Tourism Department is www.RioGrandeTrailNM.com. The site already sees fairly high traffic and is promoted on all Rio Grande Trail promotional materials developed through the master plan project. The website should be updated regularly with new and accurate content to encourage repeat visits. The website should reflect the personality of the Rio Grande Trail and offer useful resources for trail users, partners, volunteers, and sponsors. Given the many land managers along the trail, establishing opportunities within the website to link directly to a land manager's website for trail maintenance or user information, or to have that information automatically populate the Rio Grande Trail website, will be critical.

Rather than creating a new, independent app, the Rio Grande Trail non-profit can leverage existing resources for a more time and resource efficient way to share information broadly to users. The following is a sample of popular trail apps, where up-to-date trail information is directly accessed by users:

- AllTrails (free)
 - Features: allows users to search based on location for nearby trails, use GPS to navigate on the trail, view high quality maps, leave photos of scenic places, and connect with other users.
- MapMyHike (free)
 - Features: allows users to map trails, view popular treks, connect with other users, and use health tracking technology.
- CycleMap (free)
 - Features: plan and get detailed information about bike routes, learn about points of interest and amenities along your route, discover new routes and use them offline.
- EQUITrail (\$4.99)
 - Features: view and download equestrian trail maps, share trail information with other users
- TrailForks (free)
 - Features: interactive mountain bike trail maps with topographic layer, access information, points of interest, trail popularity and ratings, compass, and GPS tracking.

Tourism Campaign

Recommendation: The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should partner with the State of New Mexico Tourism Department to create a tourism campaign to invite and encourage visitors from outside New Mexico to visit the Rio Grande Trail. (future)

This promotional campaign would be modeled after the current “New Mexico True Campaign,” which focuses on the state’s authenticity, culture, and natural landscapes. The ongoing campaign connects communities, outdoor recreation, cuisine, history, culture into an enticing pitch to seek new experiences in New Mexico. The Rio Grande Trail will be the newest asset of national significance and a valued local amenity. Partnership with the State of New Mexico Tourism Department will legitimize the trail and boost awareness of the effort across the nation. The tourism campaign should be implemented when there is at least one 100-mile continuous segment of designated trail, as that is the length that studies show begins to attract large scale numbers of cycle tourists.⁸

⁸ Trail Towns: Proven Steps to Boost Your Trail Town Growth. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. Webinar February 2018.

Friendraising

Volunteer Programs & Events

Recommendation: The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should work with state, regional, and local partners to organize and implement community events and cultivate volunteers to help build, maintain, and promote the trail. (immediate)

In a coordinated effort across the corridor, trail managers should work with the trail non-profit to host **National Trail Day** events on as many segments of the existing trail as possible. Special events are a useful tool for inviting new users to experience the trail and obtaining media attention. By organizing many events across the Rio Grande Trail corridor, the trail's magnitude and potential will be evident. The Palmetto Conservation Foundation has used this event planning strategy to successfully raise the profile and garner statewide interest in South Carolina. **Volunteer events – or larger scale efforts such as volunteer vacations (offered by a variety of national organizations) - not only accomplish small improvement projects, but also engender a sense of ownership and create ambassadors for the trail.**

In 2016, the Pacific Crest Trail Association leveraged **\$2.5 million in volunteer hours**, highlighting the powerful potential impact created by cultivating a strong network of Rio Grande Trail supporters.⁹ The Palmetto Conservation Foundation's **volunteer partnership with AmeriCorps** is an excellent example for how the Rio Grande Trail non-profit can create employment opportunities and training for New Mexican youth, while simultaneously building and maintaining the trail. Palmetto's Conservation Corps launched in 2016. The group's crews have maintained and built numerous sections of trail, as well as responded to natural disasters and learned about environmental conservation.

EMNRD already manages the New Mexico Youth Conservation Corps program and the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps is an AmeriCorps-affiliated nonprofit, with offices in the Upper Rio Grande and Middle Rio Grande regions. These groups provide a critical long-term basis for volunteerism, youth engagement, and establishing volunteer partnerships across the state. Additionally, the Rio Grande Trail non-profit should **tap into existing user coalitions**, such as mountain bike and equestrian groups, as volunteers and trail ambassadors. This model has proven successful with other long-distance trails and has the potential to lessen user group conflict by creating joint stewards of a shared resource.

Bi-annual Rio Grande Trail Summit

Recommendation: The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should convene a bi-annual Rio Grande Trail Summit to bring public trail partners, Gateway Communities, volunteers, and non-profit staff together to celebrate successes and learn from work being done around the state. (mid-term)

A trail summit would be a regular way to gather input from user groups and make sure they have a voice in the management of the Rio Grande Trail. The Continental Divide Trail hosts a fun CDT Day that brings users and partners together from across the state. This Summit would complement that effort by targeting practitioners more than individual community members. The Carolina Thread Trail hosts a trail forum each year where industry innovators, trail enthusiasts, and communities across 15 counties in North and South Carolina. This day-long event raises money for the trail through sponsorships, facilitates sharing information between different trail groups, and provides a perfect way to publicize Thread Trail victories from the year.

⁹ Larabee, Mark. *The PCTA goes to Washington on behalf of Trails*. 2/24/17. <https://www.pcta.org/2017/pcta-goes-washington-behalf-trails-45776/>

Gateway Communities Program

Recommendation: The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should establish a Gateway Communities program to connect trail users with towns along the route for food, lodging, cultural amenities, or additional recreation activities. Program implementation will foster strong relationships with local municipalities and provide resources for developing connector trails from communities to the Rio Grande Trail. (mid-term)

In addition to connecting town to trail and establishing activity hubs with needed amenities, Gateway Community programs, also known as Trail Town programs, assist with research, business and real-estate development, and marketing. The program must have joint buy-in from the non-profit and the local community. Communities can self-select to apply or the non-profit can nominate strategically-located communities. Through the application process, potential Gateway Communities should confirm their willingness to participate and pledge resources to develop their program.

Other long-distance trails, such as the Arizona Trail and Great Allegheny Passage have used Gateway Community programs successfully to foster economic development, create jobs, and provide appealing amenities to trail users. In addition to those benefits, the Arizona Trail program found that Gateway Community residents are much more likely to volunteer or promote the trail on their own. Finally, Gateway Community programs often inspire overnight trips, which generate 6 times the revenue than a day trip.¹⁰

Fundraising

Targeted media relations

Recommendation: The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should use targeted media relations to celebrate success and show progress towards a completed trail. Ideal coverage will make being a part of the vision irresistible and serve as a fundraising tool. (immediate)

The State Parks Division has already seen good coverage of Rio Grande Trail master planning efforts. The Rio Grande Trail non-profit and state agency partners should nurture these nascent relationships with reporters around the state. Stories that resonate across the state, such as National Trail Day events, economic impact study results, or sponsorship campaign launches, should be the focus of press releases and press conferences. Earned media is also a great tool for giving valuable credit to trail sponsors.

Brochure & collateral

Recommendation: Local community partners, volunteers, the Rio Grande Trail non-profit and others should use the brochure and collateral developed as part of the master planning process. Additionally, the Rio Grande Trail non-profit should publish an Annual Trail Report to serve as a marketing tool and project update for lobbying purposes. (immediate)

The Rio Grande Trail Master Plan is accompanied by a suite of promotional materials. The posters and brochure are user-friendly and easily available in both web-ready and print-ready versions on the project website. The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should build from this suite of products to provide regular updates (every two years) as well as expand the suite. The promotional materials provide a basis for developing sponsor- and donor-facing handouts, as well as annual benchmarking report to show progress in trail development, fundraising, and friendraising. Recognizing measurable success is an important step towards making the case for potential funders and long-term resource partners.

Sponsor benefits program

¹⁰ Trail Towns: Proven Steps to Boost Your Trail Town Growth. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. Webinar February 2018.

Recommendation: The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should develop a trail sponsor program and Adopt-a-Trail program. The non-profit's Adopt-a-Trail program should draw from and work in tandem with New Mexico State Park's sponsorship program and provide guidance for how the Rio Grande Trail program should work with local jurisdictions. (immediate)

The trail sponsor program should feature different ways that businesses, foundations, and individuals can advertise their financial contributions to the trail. Sponsors at different levels will be recognized on the trail website, printed materials, collateral (patches, stickers, water bottles, t-shirts etc) and potentially verbally as a part of media coverage. The trail non-profit must work closely with the Rio Grande Trail Commission, all partner land managers along the trail, and other key stakeholders to decide which parts of the trail they are willing to sell to sponsors. For example, the Palmetto Conservation Foundation allows sponsors to brand physical pieces of infrastructure (such as the Advance America Bridge or the Blue Ridge Electric Co-op Passage) while other trails, like the Colorado Trail Foundation are very successful at leveraging donations and sponsorships without displaying logos or branding trail infrastructure. Sponsor contributions have the potential to fund large percentages of the trail. For example, in 2015, the Arizona Trail Association received 37% of its annual operating budget from private sponsor, partially through its successful Adopt-a-Trail program and the Colorado Trail Foundation received over 80%.

Managing Trail Use

Customer Service: Creating a courteous trail environment

Agencies and organizations successful at keeping trails conflict-free identify pro-active outreach and engagement, combined with on-trail user information and management. These strategies are important and effective for creating a safe and courteous trail environment. Responsibility for creating this positive, safe environment is shared between the Rio Grande Trail non-profit and land managing agencies. The non-profit will take the lead on positive messaging and creating a courteous culture, while the trail managing agencies will use their pre-existing mechanisms for enforcing regulations.

Education and Outreach

- *Recommendation: Use positive messaging to advertise clear, enforceable trail rules and regulations regarding staying on designated trails, right-of-way, warning when overtaking, speed limits, etc. Negotiate with local trail section partners to create one cohesive set of rules for the trail.*

For example, instead of posting a sign saying, "Don't speed" post one that states, "Please travel at a safe speed." Numerous studies show positive messaging achieves better overall compliance from road and trail users.¹¹

- *Recommendation: Train staff and volunteers that a friendly, trail environment will foster a positive experience for users and preempt user group conflict.¹²*

Pair this approach with enforcement strategies such as monitoring, warnings, radar, and citations.

¹¹ Hoekstra, Tamara and Wegman, Fred. "Improving the effectiveness of road safety campaigns: Current and new practices." IATSS Research. November 22, 2010.

¹² Trail Use Conflict Study. California State Parks Road and Trail Change in-Use Evaluation Process, prepared June 2012 by Alta Planning + Design

- *Recommendation: Create a “Trail Rangers” program where volunteers can hand out local restaurant gift cards or other rewards for good trail behavior and report vandalism or maintenance issues. Involve different trail user group members as volunteers or paid Trail Rangers.*

The Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail, in Florida, has a successful application-based Trail Ranger Program. Many program volunteers are retirees from the neighboring community who enjoy the opportunity to patrol the trail by bike or on foot. The Rangers provide information to visitors, assist with light maintenance, and special events. Participation requires completing a certification course and 100 hours of service in the first year. Volunteer efforts are supported by law enforcement, because they cannot enforce speeding violations or other crimes.

- *Recommendation: Use the website and social media to share up-to-date information about changes to trail regulations, maintenance, and closures.*

Provide information to users about rules, policies, and advice for trail user respect, right-of-way requirements, courtesy, routes, destinations, and conditions. The non-profit should link to land managing agency websites with up-to-date information about trail conditions. This approach will save the non-profit from needing to devote as many hours keeping their website up to date.

Trail Design

Conflicts on paved trails tend to center on the speed differential of trail users with different skills and desired uses compared to other users, and on slower users blocking the trail. User conflicts can be a particular challenge at trail junctions and entry points, and at activity areas and other stopping points. Overall, actual accidents between trail users are quite rare. However, trail design, in addition to outreach and education, can facilitate a positive user experience.

Recommendation: Particularly on newly built segments, design the trail using best practices that encourage good trail user behavior and avoid user conflict.

1. Tread Width and Passing Space

Provide sufficient width of the trail tread and existing or created space to allow users to pass each other, either as a continuous condition, or as passing spaces at defined intervals. This also includes vertical clearance from overhanging trees and objects.

2. Sight Distance

Include adequate length of the trail visible ahead to the user. This is particularly important to resolve in conjunction with speed control features, turns, and sinuous layout.

3. Turn Radius

Create a minimum inside radius of turns to ensure that they can be comfortably negotiated.

4. Sinuosity

Lay out a trail with many curves and minimal straight sections (however, with sufficient sight distance). This helps limit the speed of mountain bikers and other users.

5. Speed Control Features

Install pinch points, choke points, trail anchors, technical trail features, ‘stiles’, and other elements specifically designed to limit users’ speeds.

6. Surface Texture

Design the relative smoothness, evenness, and firmness of the trail tread to moderate travel speed by

mountain bicyclists, including the presence of irregularities.

7. **Low Trail Structures**

Avoid steps and waterbar structures that constrain access for horses and mountain bikers and can create points of conflict.

8. **Gradient**

Apply design limits or variations in the gradient of the trail to allow for multiple uses.

9. **Trail Layout and Classification**

When considering trail suitability for multiple uses, factor the level of use of the trail, availability of alternative trails and routes, and the potential for trails to primarily serve one or multiple user types.

Special Event Uses

When special events are hosted on a passage of the Rio Grande Trail, a single day with a large volume of hikers, runners, or mountain bikers can create substantial maintenance issues, as well as conflicts with other users of the trail. The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should establish special event guidelines or requirements, as outlined below, and help the company or organization get the needed permits across jurisdictions. Legal concerns and logistical challenges preclude offering one single permit to hold events on the trail.

Special Event Usage: “Passport to the Rio Grande Trail” Guidelines

To ensure a successful event for all involved parties, guidelines should specify:

- Which sections of the passage are available for special events and which are not
- What types of events are permissible or prohibited (from mountain bike races to mud runs to scavenger hunts)
- Which months of the year or days of the week are available or restricted for special events

Special Event Usage: Requirements

To ensure a successful event for all involved parties, requirements should specify:

- A meeting with Rio Grande Trail non-profit staff and the landowner/land manager at least four weeks prior to the event.
- A special event usage fee and/or a negotiated donation amount to be provided to the Rio Grande Trail Maintenance Fund.
- Applying for appropriate permits for all affected jurisdictions. If possible, the Rio Grande trail non-profit should work across partnerships to coordinate fee structures.
- Maintenance activities that need to occur within a set timeframe after the event to restore the trail's condition and repair any damage. (This could occur as a volunteer workday organized by the event promoter).
- Opportunity for the Rio Grande Trail non-profit to advertise at the event.
- Permission for the Rio Grande Trail non-profit to contact the event attendees (once) with an email inviting them to become members of and/or volunteer for the organization.

Trail Maintenance

Rio Grande Trail maintenance needs will vary along different trail segments, depending on surface and design, surrounding landscape, land manager, and other factors. Refer to the Rio Grande Trail Design Guidelines for the different Rio Grande Trail typologies. Trail segments that are within jurisdictions with maintenance capacity, such as State Parks, BLM, or a municipal park's department, will not need trail maintenance guidance

from the Rio Grande Trail non-profit. However, new segments of trail being built or designated by a land manager without maintenance capacity will need to be a part of the Rio Grande Trail maintenance strategy.

Why is Trail Maintenance Important?

Well-maintained facilities create a pleasant and welcoming environment for trail users and establish a sense that users will be safe on the trail. Maintenance is an expression of ownership of property and psychologically deters bad user behavior. Visibly well-maintained trails also have environmental benefits, including minimizing erosion caused by deviant trail users and fostering an appreciation for order in environmentally-sensitive areas.

Crime Prevention Through Environment Design (CPTED) Principles are the widely accepted design and maintenance concepts that highlight why trail maintenance is important. Proper design addresses both the perceived safety issues (i.e. feeling safe or fear of crime) and actual safety threats (i.e. infrastructure failure and criminal acts). The basic premise of CPTED is that the arrangement and design of infrastructure and open spaces can encourage or discourage undesirable behavior and criminal activity. When all spaces have a defined use and the use is clearly legible in the landscape, it is easier to identify undesired behavior.

Maintenance Standards

Recommendation: As the Rio Grande Trail non-profit will not own or manage the vast majority of the trail, they will need to tailor maintenance plans to each trail section's unique context. When possible, the non-profit should defer to the local land manager to maintain the trail according to that agency's standards. When necessary, the trail non-profit should develop a plan to handle maintenance themselves or partner with another state or national agency to handle trail maintenance on unmaintained segments. Table XX below outlines some routine maintenance tasks and their recommended frequency.

The Rio Grande Trail non-profit should consider adopting State Park's trail maintenance standards or creating their own trail manual that outlines standards of trail maintenance for all types of trail included in Rio Grande Trail. Many peer long-distance trail non-profits conduct a significant amount of trail maintenance themselves, with some paid staff and volunteer support. The Arizona Trail Association has paid staff and a Trail Stewards program to conduct trail maintenance. Trail Stewards are assigned to a section of trail and partnered with a staff person at the land managing agency. ATA staff has found this to be a successful approach and are currently finishing their maintenance standards for each ecologically-specific region.

Table XX: Routine Maintenance Tasks and Frequency

Maintenance Task	Suggested Frequency
Major damage response (fallen trees, washouts, flooding)	Immediate in response to need
Site furnishings: replace damaged components	As needed
Graffiti removal	Weekly; as needed
Trash disposal	Weekly during high use; twice monthly during low use
Litter pick up	Weekly during high use; twice monthly during low use
Fencing repair	Inspect monthly for holes and damage, repair immediately
Inspections	Seasonally (4 times a year)

Remove obstructions from trail path	As needed, quarterly inspections.
Trail sweeping/blowing	As needed during high-use season.
Culvert inspection	Before any rainy season; after major storms
Maintaining culvert inlets	Inspect before onset of wet season
Lighting repair	Annually
Water bar maintenance (earthen trails)	Annually
Shoulder plant trimming (weeds, trees, branches)	Bi-annual (Fall and Spring)
Sign repair/replacement	4-6 years
Introduced tree and shrub plantings, trimming	1-3 years
Pavement sealing; pothole repair	5-15 years

Volunteer Resources

Recommendation: Leverage volunteer labor to conduct trail maintenance when appropriate. Connect land managers with Rio Grande Trail volunteers as part of an AmeriCorps partnership, specific events, or regular work days. Volunteer groups in New Mexico, such as the Backcountry Horsemen, are already interested in assisting with maintenance.

Volunteers are one of the most precious resources for a long-distance trail effort. Mobilize them wisely! Convert volunteer hours into cost savings to show the direct financial benefit to region and state.

Soft Surface trails: It is appropriate to use volunteers to help design and construct a soft surface trail, with the assistance of someone with a professional services certification. Volunteers can easily help: clear brush or weeds, clean, paint, and inspect trails for damage and erosion. Volunteers should not be used to construct structures.

Hard Surface trails: It is not appropriate to have volunteers design and construct hard surface trails. Volunteers can help with sweeping, edging trail surfaces, and other similar tasks as for soft surface trails,

On roadways (bike lanes, shared roads, etc.): Volunteer labor is not as effective. A better approach is to work with the local municipality to conduct maintenance.