

23rd Rio Grande Trail Commission Meeting – Minutes

Friday, September 19, 2025 // 9 AM – 12 PM

Taos Council Chambers - 120 Civic Plaza Dr, Taos, NM 87571

Commissioners Present, In-Person:

- Michael Chacon – Tribal Environmental Justice Specialist, IAD
- Howard Gross – HG Conservation Solutions, Public 1
- Steve Harris – Rio Grande Restoration, River Eco
- Ben Bajema – OFS Senior Advisor, EMNRD (Chair)
- Karina Armijo – Outdoor Recreation Division Director, EDD
- Shannon Glendenning – Urban & Regional Planner, DOT
- Dan Carter – Continental Divide Trail, Trail Mgmt.
- Novela Salazar - General Counsel, TD
- Myron Temchin – Temchin Environmental Planning, Public 2

Commissioners Present, Online:

- Toby Velasquez – SPD Division Director, SPD

Commissioners Absent:

- Tucker Davidson – Audubon Society, Bird Eco

1. Call to Order

Chair Bajema called the meeting to order.

2. Roll Call

All Commissioners introduced themselves.

3. Approval of Agenda

Chair Bajema requested a motion to approve the agenda.

Commissioner Armijo made a motion.

Commissioner Harris seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Commissioner Chacon – YES; Commissioner Gross – YES; Commissioner Harris – YES; Chair Bajema – YES; Commissioner Armijo – YES; Commissioner Glendenning – YES; Commissioner Carter – YES; Commissioner Salazar – YES; Commissioner Temchin – YES; Commissioner Velasquez – YES

With unanimous consent, this motion is approved.

4. Approval of Minutes from the 22nd Rio Grande Trail Commission meeting

Chair Bajema requested a motion to approve the agenda.

Commissioner Temchin made a motion.

Commissioner Gross seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Commissioner Chacon – YES; Commissioner Gross – YES; Commissioner Harris – YES; Chair Bajema – YES; Commissioner Armijo – YES; Commissioner Glendenning – YES; Commissioner Carter – YES; Commissioner Salazar – YES; Commissioner Temchin – YES; Commissioner Velasquez – YES

With unanimous consent, this motion is approved.

5. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

6. New Business

a. Updates From the Chair (Chair Bajema)

Summary:

- This marks the third meeting of the calendar year, fulfilling the Commission's statutory meeting requirements.
- In the absence of Commissioner Davidson, Chair Bajema will provide the Legislative Subcommittee update later in the meeting.
- The Commission currently has \$225,000 in appropriated funds from the state legislature remaining. Members are encouraged to prioritize discussions on funding allocation, including potential uses such as signage, contracting, or nonprofit support.

- Emphasized that demonstrating effective use of current funds will strengthen the case for future appropriations, especially as future phases may require more resources.
- Expressed appreciation to all Commissioners for their participation, including Commissioner Velasquez, who is attending virtually.

b. Guest Speaker: Brad Higdon, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Summary:

- Mr. Higdon shared his personal background with trails and how it shaped his values and career in recreation planning.
- Emphasized the need to connect youth to nature through accessible, local trails—especially for underserved communities.
- Highlights the importance of culturally respectful trail development, including collaboration with tribal communities.
- Mr. Higdon quotes *The Blueprint for 21st Century Outdoor Recreation*: “The Bureau believes that all visitors should be able to realize mental, physical, and spiritual benefits from public lands”, and states that he has adopted this as a mantra for the management of public lands
- Mentions that the Enchanted Circle Trail Association's *Regional Trail Plan* has become a standard for good trail planning in the area and that it speaks to the idea of connecting youth to trails. He reads: “Trails can give people a sense of place and share community identity and pride. Trails can help celebrate local heritage and preserve and unique the unique features that make a community special. Trails play a role in responsibility and responsibly guiding visitors away from sensitive habitat areas and vulnerable cultural sites. Trails are an excellent way for residents to express the local character and culture of their area. They can provide a tremendous sense of place, especially trail corridors with historical and cultural significance.”
- Mr. Higdon paraphrases representative Teresa Fernández: “When you experience awe, you’re a kinder person”, and closes by affirming BLM’s commitment to partnership and support for the Rio Grande Trail

Commissioner Temchin: What can we do, and what can the commission do to voice our concern about the direction of all these withdrawals and rescinding acts that put much of this federal land at risk?

Brad Higdon: We already have discretion, authority, and a streamlined process to dispose of and acquire public lands.

Commissioner Temchin: Does a phone call or letter from citizens or organizations matter against the direction of the executive branch of the federal government, or is it a waste of time?

Brad Higdon: Every voice matters. All comments feed the BLM's perspective about how the public appreciates and uses public lands.

c. Subcommittee Reports

i. Tribal Subcommittee (Commissioner Chacon)

1. Meetings with San Felipe Pueblo, San Ildefonso Pueblo

Summary:

- Tribes were not involved in the original Rio Grande Trail planning, and many did not request the trail; this lack of early engagement continues to affect trust and participation.
- Tribal views on water are deeply spiritual and cultural, often conflicting with the idea of recreational use by non-tribal members.
- The Tribal Subcommittee is actively working to improve outreach and address concerns around sovereignty, cultural site protection, and meaningful involvement in planning.
- Several Pueblos, including San Felipe and Sandia, have raised concerns about proposed trail alignments being too close to sacred or culturally significant areas.
- There is growing support for restructuring the Commission to include more representation from Pueblos along the Rio Grande, who have legal and cultural primacy over several river stretches.
- Suggested next steps include partnering with tribal-serving nonprofits, attending broad tribal convenings, and continuing and expanding outreach to Pueblos to foster trust and engagement.
- Acknowledges that meaningful participation will take time and persistence, and that respectful, long-term relationship-building is essential to success. We need stronger structural commitments to tribal engagement.

Chair Bajema: It may be worth following up with Nambé Pueblo. A non-tribal member who oversees the Pueblo's economic development expressed that they were interested in developing more outdoor recreation opportunities.

Commissioner Salazar: Has there been difficulty due to the often-changing Pueblo leadership?

Commissioner Chacon: That is not a big impediment to this project, but you're correct that leadership terms often vary. The tribal council doesn't change quite as often.

Commissioner Temchin: Can the tribal subcommittee better map out where cultural site issues are, and if those issues are "fatal" or can be worked around? Can Pland or Carl Colonius help map communicate where cultural site conflicts are?

Commissioner Carter: Planning actions on public lands typically follows the NEPA process, which evaluates cultural, biological, and other resources. Having access to cultural data or involving Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs) during on-the-ground planning helps streamline trail alignment and ensures respectful land use. A framework developed by the U.S. Forest Service helps outline informal tribal engagement and encourages respectful collaboration.

Chair Bajema: A representative present at the Water and Natural Resources Interim Committee requested that we follow up with Santa Ana and Sandia Pueblo regarding recent trail alignment changes made in response to their concerns. Specifically, the rerouting of the trail away from areas near the Rio Grande and removing the segment through the Sandia Mountains.

ii. Alignment Subcommittee (Commissioner Carter)

1. Trail Segment Prioritization

Summary:

- The Alignment Subcommittee has been meeting biweekly to confirm, clean up, and refine the existing alignment, establish trail designation priorities, and coordinate with partners after the hiatus.
- Over 30 miles of existing trail were designated this year, with 9+ more miles pending—a significant increase from the previous total of ~90 miles.
- Focus remains on designating existing trails first, refining the application process, and addressing "low-hanging fruit".
- A key new segment is proposed for designation in the Taos area through the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.
- Nearly 300 miles of informal trail along irrigation districts is being explored for future designation. There has been progress in conversations with these irrigation districts.
- Community outreach and engagement with tribal and local partners are planned to identify and refine potential new routes.
- How RGT signage can be incorporated into existing land manager signage is being discussed.
- Next steps include further implementation and finalization of signage and the review of the signage package, prioritization of new segments, and securing support for trail development and stewardship.

2. New Trail Segment Considerations

a. Santa Fe to Taos connectivity: scope of engagement

3. Trail Segment Designation

a. Horsethief Mesa Trail, Taos County

Brad Higdon (Summary):

- The Horsethief Mesa Trail has been officially recognized since the 2012 land use plan, though it had existed for over a decade prior.
- A travel management plan was developed 5–6 years ago due to increased recreational use and route proliferation near residential areas.
- The trail is reaffirmed as an important recreational asset in both the travel plan and the recent Rio Grande del Norte National Monument plan.
- It is considered a strong candidate ("low-hanging fruit") for inclusion in the Rio Grande Trail, especially as it is already a well-established and well-loved trail.
- NEPA and public engagement processes have already been completed for this trail.
- Future realignments may be needed to address changing wildlife patterns and protect cultural sites.
- The BLM supports the trails' designation and is committed to ongoing management.

Chair Bajema: Can you talk about the strategy for making the descent into the gorge from the canyon rim?

Brad Higdon: All over the landscape, there are historic trails, whether they're sheep herder trails, ancient trails, etc. These trails contain features that can be utilized as part of the route finding for the RGT. Natural traversable features exist that can be taken advantage of.

Chair Bajema: I would like to emphasize how strongly this segment aligns with the vision of the Rio Grande Trail. It doesn't get more ideal than this. This is a great alignment and a great opportunity to advance the vision and the mission of the trail.

Chair Bajema requested a motion to vote for the approval to designate the Horsethief Mesa Trail as part of the Rio Grande Trail

Commissioner Harris made a motion.

Commissioner Carter seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Commissioner Chacon – YES; Commissioner Gross – YES; Commissioner Harris – YES; Chair Bajema – YES; Commissioner Armijo – YES; Commissioner Glendenning – YES; Commissioner Carter – YES; Commissioner Salazar – YES; Commissioner Temchin – YES; Commissioner Velasquez – YES

With unanimous consent, this motion is approved.

b. Camino Real: Santa Fe River to Camino de Rey Road

Dan Majewski (Summary):

- The proposed trail segment in Santa Fe connects the Santa Fe River Trail to Camino de Rey Road and is part of the Camino Real Trail.
- Original alignment toward San Ildefonso Pueblo was removed due to it being a dead-end and not viable for a continuous route.
- The new segment is an existing paved trail that naturally fits into the Rio Grande Trail network.
- The goal is to eventually connect Caja del Rio to the greater Santa Fe area; future meetings will address alignment details.
- The City of Santa Fe provided a letter of support, and Santa Fe County passed a resolution backing the trail's designation.

Chair Bajema requested a motion to vote for the approval to designate the Santa Fe River to Camino de Rey Road portion of the Camino Real as part of the Rio Grande Trail

Commissioner Armijo made a motion.

Commissioner Harris seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Commissioner Chacon – YES; Commissioner Gross – YES; Commissioner Harris – YES

Chair Bajema – YES; Commissioner Armijo – YES; Commissioner Glendenning – YES; Commissioner Carter – YES; Commissioner Salazar – YES; Commissioner Temchin – YES; Commissioner Velasquez – YES

With unanimous consent, this motion is approved.

4. Trail Segment Updates, Taos County

- a. Bridge to Bridge (BLM)***
- b. John Dunn (BLM)***
- c. Horsethief Connector (BLM)***
- d. Garrapata Canyon (USFS)***

5. Administrative Documents

- a. Revised Designation Application***
- b. Revised Realignment Application***
- c. Revised Letter of Support***

Dan Majewski (Summary):

- The application formats have been updated to be more intuitive. They now use more checkboxes to highlight key trail attributes like access, user groups, surfacing, accessibility, and difficulty.
- Narrative sections are still included, but the new format aims to make trail details clearer for both applicants and commissioners.
- The goal is to improve understanding and decision-making during trail segment reviews and approvals.

Chair Bajema requested a motion to vote for the approval of all three revised administrative documents: The Designation Application, Realignment Application, and Letter of Support

Commissioner Armijo made a motion.

Commissioner Chacon seconded the motion.

Roll Call Vote:

Commissioner Chacon – YES; Commissioner Gross – YES; Commissioner Harris – YES; Chair Bajema – YES; Commissioner Armijo – YES; Commissioner Glendenning – YES; Commissioner Carter – YES; Commissioner Salazar – YES; Commissioner Temchin – YES; Commissioner Velasquez – YES

iii. Legislative Committee (Commissioner Davidson was absent; Chair Bajema led this update)

1. Update on proposed legislation

2. Status of Project Management Planning Initiative

Commissioner Temchin (Summary):

- The Rio Grande Trail Commission has \$225,000 in state funding for FY 2026 and is responsible for managing and reporting its use efficiently and transparently.
- A Program Management Plan (PgMP) is being proposed to organize and track how funds are used across subcommittees.
- The PMP will include five key components for each subcommittee:
 - Scope of work
 - Schedule
 - Performance/Deliverables
 - Cost Estimate
 - Challenges & Risk

- Templates have been developed in Word format to keep input simple (100 words or less per section) and consistent across subcommittees. Examples and sample content have been created to demonstrate how to fill out the templates.
- The PgMP is designed to be concise, measurable, and adaptable, with potential for quarterly or semiannual updates.

Chair Bajema: It would be valuable if all Subcommittees could complete this exercise before the next commission meeting in January.

Commissioner Temchin: I am available to provide an editing and formatting service for all submissions so that the RGTC has the appearance of being one unified whole.

Commissioner Glendenning: Mr. Chair, does this help you meet your requirements for reporting back to the legislature?

Chair Bajema: Yes, it is useful to show how we've spent the money and prove that we've spent it in an effective way so that we can make a good case to receive more funding in the future.

Commissioner Glendenning: Should this template include a section for additional needs then so we can better make our case for future funding?

Chair Bajema: Yes

Commissioner Temchin: We can display our need for future funding in the section titled "Challenges", where we can detail all that we could do with an increased budget.

Chair Bajema – Proposed Amendment to State Trail Systems Act (Summary):

- Special districts (Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District - MRGCD, Elephant Butte Irrigation District - EBID) face serious liability concerns over allowing recreation on levee roads. People already use levee roads to recreate, and when injuries occur, insurance carriers force settlements.
- There is an unclear liability framework since recreation isn't part of special districts' statutory mission.
- Proposing to amend the limited liability statute within the State Trail System Act to explicitly cover special districts (and possibly state/federal entities).
- Current law provides liability protection for private landowners granting easements, but case law excludes special districts from this protection. The amendment would supersede that case law, including special districts as "landowners" for liability limitation purposes.
- Success would "unlock" roughly 300 miles of trail south of Albuquerque.
- Similar efforts have been attempted for a decade but have faced resistance.

- There is a chance these changes could instead be made by rule and that the Secretary could promulgate new rules within the State Trail Systems Act, but this is currently unclear.

iv. Non-Profit subcommittee (Commissioner Gross)

v. Proposal to use RGT Office funding to hire a contractor to move the NPO formation forward

Summary:

- A nonprofit would provide consistency in work on the RGT as well as consistency in fundraising. The non-profit can undertake much of the responsibility of contracting, developing community trail programs, trail maintenance, and youth engagement.
- The scope of work for the nonprofit subcommittee calls for producing a blueprint report for creating the nonprofit, which would include a thorough public engagement process to raise awareness, gather input, and identify potential board members and partners.
- A contractor would then help facilitate board formation, present the report, invite members, and seat the board for its first meeting. The nonprofit will ultimately be autonomous but guided by Commission input. This contract would be found through a bidding process.
- An MOU between the Commission, the nonprofit, and major partners like EMNRD and ORD would help guide the nonprofit and provide predictability. Funding agreements from the Rio Grande Trail Office could provide further cohesion.

Chair Bajema: How was the amount of \$100,000 decided as the initial contract amount?

Commissioner Gross: \$100,000 would be a “not to exceed amount”. A better understanding of the real cost could be found when looking over contractors’ competitive bids on the role.

Commissioner Temchin: Would this NPO have a direct funding source in the Rio Grande Trail Commission, or would it apply for grants?

Commissioner Gross: Funding from the Rio Grande Trail office would be a good idea to help the organization get off the ground in FY27, but in the future, they will also be applying for grants as a separate entity.

Chair Bajema: Mr. Colonius, in your professional opinion, is \$100,000 an appropriate sum of money for this scope of work?

Carl Colonius: I hope we receive bids significantly below that amount.

Commissioner Harris: It would be good to get the input of legal minds in ORD and in State Parks about how contracting would work, or how the anti-donation clause would impact the formation and the work of the organization.

Commissioner Carter: To set expectations realistically, getting a signed MOU with all these governmental entities could take much longer than six months. The CDT coalition has an MOU, and it took years. A draft MOU would be more appropriate at this time.

Commissioner Temchin: The subcommittee emphasized that the five-month timeline requires extensive outreach beyond landowners, including state agencies, local groups, and existing nonprofits, which will take significant time and effort. To succeed, the project will need a well-funded outreach program and likely professional consultants who already understand New Mexico's networks, helping to quickly identify the right partners and contributors.

Commissioner Glendenning: I suggest using an on-call contract structure to give EMNRD flexibility in procurement. This approach allows issuing task orders for specific items and the ability to add new tasks later with agreed-upon quotes, making it easier to adjust the scope of work without being locked into a rigid contract.

d. Miscellaneous

i. Signage Development

- 1. Tribal engagement***
- 2. Signage languages***
- 3. Strategies for applying RGT signage to existing trail signs***
- 4. Interim low-cost signage strategy ideation***

Commissioner Gross: Are we anticipating a request to the commission to expend funding this year to start producing signage?

Dan Majewski: We hope that by providing this guidance, it gives you all the opportunity to do exactly that. If the commission can provide feedback on this signage plan, we can finalize it and create specific sign designs. Then we might be able to produce signage ideally by the end of next June.

Commissioner Armijo: Mr. Majewski, can you clarify the timeline to get revisions and updates on this signage plan? I would love to see some of the already designated areas planned for signage fabrication and installation.

Dan Majewski: We are finishing our last round of feedback with the commission and with our federal partners. We are open to the proposal of a timeline.

Commissioner Carter: The sign standards should better address how and where signage is installed in accordance with the relevant land manager's standards. Federal standards can be extensive. Also, the RGT logo is currently upside down and is not in accordance with the family of national scenic and historic recreation trails.

Commissioner Temchin: I propose we develop a priority list for segments we have already designated and ask for the funding to create signage on them in FY26. If that is reasonable, it should be included in one of the plans toward the 225,000 legislative grant.

Chair Bajema: Budget breakdown of the \$225,000 as of now: ~\$20,000 obligated to commissioner reimbursements and promotional materials, ~\$60,000 obligated to Pland in an administrative support contract, and \$100,000 allocated for the nonprofit. So that leaves about \$45,000, which there has been some talk of going to contract a YCC grant to connect the final area in Taos County, or that money could go to signage. It might be the most appropriate use of funds to identify how much money we would need to put up signage through all the existing designated routes and ask for that money in the upcoming budget session.

Commissioner Temchin: I propose a pilot signage program where we commit to fully installing signage on a portion of the trail to solicit public input and get a better understanding of signage costs.

7. Announcement of Next Meetings

a. Fri, Jan 16, 2026 – Albuquerque

b. Fri, April 3, 2026 – Las Cruces

Commissioner Carter: We need to get the dates and locations of these next meetings onto our website and send them out in other ways as soon as possible to solicit maximum public input at the meetings.

Chair Bajema: There will be an internal deadline of November 15 for Subcommittees to submit their project management plans to the legislative subcommittee for a final deadline of December 1.

8. Public Comment

9. Adjournment

Chair Bajema: The 23rd Rio Grande Trail Commission meeting is hereby adjourned.