

Taos Pueblo takes ownership of Ponce de León springs

By Matthew van Buren

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Talks between Taos Pueblo and Taos Land Trust culminated in a historic signing during the Taos Pueblo Powwow, Saturday evening (July 14).

The signing ceremony marked the completion of discussions over the transfer of legal ownership of the Ponce de León Hot Springs to Taos Pueblo.

According to information from Taos Land Trust, a local nonprofit focused on land conservation, it had been searching for 15 years to find “a fitting steward” for the 44-acre parcel, located south of the town of Taos in Miranda Canyon.

Taos Land Trust Outreach Coordinator Tom McCampbell said the signing was “quite an experience.”

“We got to be part of the (powwow’s) Grand Entry,” he said. “It was an emotional ceremony. I thought it was very poignant.”

He said he feels honored to have been involved in the transfer of the property to Taos Pueblo. “It’s been a really moving experience for us,” McCampbell said.

History of the springs

According to information from the Land Trust, the hillside hot springs “issue forth from fault zone fractures in the Embudo granite.” The property ranges in elevation from 7,180-7,400 feet, with the land transitioning “from the sandy reaches of the Miranda Arroyo to the rocky, piñon-juniper-forested foothills below the Cuchilla de Oro ridgeline.” Signs of wildlife including mountain lion, black bear, elk, mule deer and bobcat have been observed on the property.

The springs are considered sacred by Taos Pueblo and are of historical



From left, Taos Pueblo War Chief Benito M. Sandoval, Gov. Laureano B. Romero and Lt. War Chief Albert Archuleta give Ernie Atencio, former executive director of the Taos Land Trust, center, and his son Dylan, information on the Kachina doll they gave to Atencio, Saturday night (July 14) at the Taos Pueblo Powwow. The tribe’s gift noted Atencio’s work on the Ponce de León Hot Spring’s return.

Tina Larkin

significance to Picuris Pueblo, as well, according to Taos Land Trust, though the property has been privately owned since it was patented by the federal government in 1909.

“The property lies next to the historic Camino Real (trail) and was once part of the Cristóbal de la Serna Land Grant, which was established in 1710,” a brief history of the parcel provided by Taos Land Trust states. “The springs are the source for an important acequia that has provided irrigation water for farmers in Llano Quemado and other villages downstream for centuries.”

According to the background document, the Martínez family developed a small resort in the area in 1928, and water from the springs was diverted into concrete pools that still exist today. The springs served as a resource for bathing, laundry and recreation for almost four decades afterward.

“The late 1960s busloads of hippies began settling in the Taos Valley,”

the document states. “These young people and their counter-culture ways were attracted to the hot springs and often caused clashes with the older, more traditional residents of the area.”

The Río del Norte Development Corporation purchased the property in 1973, according to the document, intending to build a new resort, before selling the land to the Miranda Limited Partnership in 1992. The Land Trust purchased the property in 1997 with financial assistance from an anonymous donor in order to protect it from future development.

“The Land Trust’s intention was to return the property to a usable condition within the covenants of the purchase agreement to protect the springs and surrounding sites,” the document states.

In 2009, Taos Land Trust and Santa Fe Conservation Trust signed a conservation easement protecting the property and springs in perpetuity,

McCampbell said.

Access issues

Public access to the springs has been at issue during years of talks about the land transfer, according to a Land Trust release and previous reports in *The Taos News*.

“It has been challenging, to say the least, to balance protection and stewardship of the land with allowing public access,” former Taos Land Trust executive director Ernie Atencio is quoted as saying in an announcement. “But we were committed to it and have been allowing people onto the property by way of a free permit.”

Taos Pueblo will continue to provide public access using a permit system, according to Taos Land Trust.

“Under the terms of the (conservation agreement), public access to the property is limited to supervised educational programs, nature observation, ecological and geological study, and non-motorized pedestrian recreation,”

the Land Trust’s background document states. McCampbell said he is confident Taos Pueblo will be a good steward of the property into the future and bring a high level of care and attention to the springs.

“Blue Lake, the Río Grande, Red Clay, the Hot Springs — these areas are critical to our well-being,” War Chief Benito Sandoval is quoted as saying in a Land Trust release. “Without them we would not exist. It is important to preserve these areas for the future of our children and all who live here. We are very grateful.”

In years preceding the transfer to Taos Pueblo, Taos Land Trust had spoken with Carson National Forest, New Mexico State Parks, the town and county of Taos, Cristóbal de la Serna Land Grant and Picuris Pueblo, about taking ownership of the property, according to a Land Trust release.

“Eventually, after seven years of intermittent negotiations, Taos Pueblo emerged as the entity most capable of preserving the land and its unique natural and cultural resources,” the release states. “Moreover, the Pueblo is committed to honoring the terms and conditions of the conservation easement, which run with the land, including the provision that the property remain accessible to all the people of the Taos community.”

According to the announcement, longtime Taos Land Trust board member Crestina Armstrong Trujillo was moved by the finalization of the transfer.

“I’ve devoted nine years of my life to this project,” she is quoted as saying. “To see it finally completed is monumental. This is the right thing to do. I believe that in the long run, the transfer of the hot springs to the Pueblo will strengthen relations in our community.”