

Thousands of acres later, director to leave land trust

By Matthew van Buren

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The Taos Land Trust is seeking a new executive director, as Ernie Atencio has decided to move on after working to protect thousands of acres over the last nine years.

Atencio said he's proud of the work he has done with the Taos Land Trust, including helping to create conservation easements and achieve national accreditation for the local nonprofit.

However, he said he feels it is time for him to move on to his next venture, which may include working on a couple of book projects or doing freelance consulting.

"I'm still trying to piece that together," Atencio said of his future undertakings. "I'm not leaving. My roots are here."

Atencio's family is from Dixon, and though he largely grew up in Denver, he said he remembers visiting New Mexico often and living for periods with family members in Dixon and Albuquerque.

"I lived (in Dixon) in my early years, until I was about 6 and we moved to Denver," he said. "Over the years, I stayed involved in Northern New Mexico."

Atencio was a self-described "juvenile delinquent" for a time in his youth, even temporarily dropping out of high school. However, he said a couple of crucial life experiences helped him find focus and determine his future path.

Among them was a three-week-long Outward Bound trip he took after graduating from high school. He said it was a powerful wilderness trip that taught him about the leadership skills he never knew he had and instilled in him a lifelong love of the outdoors.

"It blew my mind," he said. "I was just so engaged and learned so much about the world ... That was absolutely pivotal."

Atencio has since held jobs leading Outward Bound trips, teaching environmental education in Yosemite and working for a winter season as an interpretive park ranger at Bandelier National Monument.

"The outdoors have been an essential part of my adult life," he said.

Another defining experience occurred when Atencio took an anthropology class in junior college. He said the class was eye-opening in a number of ways, including how people interact with each other.

"It just made sense of the relationship people have with the world, with the landscape," he said. "I couldn't think of anything else to study."

Atencio went on to get his bachelor's degree in anthropology from University of New Mexico and a master's in socio-cultural anthropology from Northern Arizona University.



U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, left, and Ernie Atencio, who is leaving as executive director of the Taos Land Trust, stand Tuesday (April 10) near Arroyo Seco with the El Salto Mountain in the background.

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"I think it's a pretty powerful perspective on the world," he said.

He said he felt he had the freedom to study anthropology — or anything else he may have wanted to — in part because his parents were just glad he graduated from high school after his somewhat troubled youth.

"I feel somehow blessed that I did not grow up in a family that had great professional expectations," he said.

While in graduate school, Atencio said he did fieldwork in Ladakh, India, on the Tibetan Plateau. He said some of the culture he experienced there, such as communal ditch-cleaning, reminded him of home. He started wondering what he was doing on the other side of the world and felt pulled back to Northern New Mexico.

Since returning here in 1996, Atencio has worked for the Valles Caldera Coalition, helping to advocate for appropriate management of the area, done freelance consulting and writing work and spent several years as projects director for Amigos Bravos, the water-focused Taos nonprofit.

He said a project he was involved with when he worked with Amigos Bravos is particularly memorable. He helped collect the stories of *viejitos*, tribal elders and others, some just general and others focused on a specific subject, such as how the community of Questa and the Red River have changed over the years.

"I was particularly proud of (the) oral history project I started up," he said. "I just think it's an incredible treasure of wisdom and knowledge."

During his time with the Taos Land Trust, Atencio has helped place 4,000 acres of private land into conservation easements, as well as working on preservation projects like the Taos Valley Overlook and Ute Mountain with the Trust for Public Land.

"I'm particularly proud of the smaller, irrigated agricultural properties," he said.

Atencio said those are some of the most important properties for growing food, biological diversity and "cultural continuity." He said irrigated agricultural lands are part of the "fabric of the community."

"Those projects are just so important," he said.

Atencio also said he is proud that the Taos Land Trust was nationally accredited during his time with the organization.

"That's a huge accomplishment," he said. "We survived the gauntlet of national accreditation."

He said a "professional staff, a supportive board and great community partners" have been an integral part of the Land Trust's accomplishments, including forming the *De la Tierra a la Cosecha* collaboration with the Taos County Economic Development Corporation and the Taos Valley Acequia Association and growing the Taos Land Trust into a "nationally known and well-respected organization doing some of the most innovative work in the field."

Atencio said as executive director he has had diverse responsibilities, from community outreach, financial management and fundraising to

project management and completion, though in recent years the fundraising and administrative management have taken up more and more of his time.

"That's the nature of trying to run a nonprofit these days," he said.

According to a job description issued by the Taos Land Trust, the executive director is responsible for community relations, including building relationships and developing a public communications program, overseeing land conservation efforts including negotiating easements, fundraising, performing administrative duties and working with the board of directors.

For more information, call (575) 751-3138, email info@taoslandtrust.org or visit www.taoslandtrust.org.