



PHOTO BY KIM KLAYTON

Commonweal has big plans for Galisteo Basin

By Paul Weideman

On March 15 Santa Fe County's Development Review Committee will pass judgment on the master plan for the Galisteo Basin Preserve, an ambitious conservation initiative to be financed through the development of a new village west of Laury. The plan put together by a Santa Fe nonprofit called the Commonweal Conservancy involves the conservation, restoration, and stewardship of more than 12,000 acres in the Galisteo Basin. The expensive undertaking would be underwritten by the sale of 965 new homes within a 300-acre "development envelope" at the northeast corner of the preserve.

Commonweal president Ted Harrison described the history of the project to date.

"I was with the Trust for Public Land for 18 years," he said. "We helped the county's Open Space and Trails Program acquire 1,500 acres of the Thornton Ranch for the preserve. The county saw it as a critical parcel because it includes an area known as Petroglyph Hill." That site, according to a recent State Parks Division study, consists

of a large hill of black basalt covered with hundreds of petroglyphs.

Harrison said Jack Kofincey, the county's planning director, was pleased with the acquisition for the preserve but was concerned about the fate of the rest of the Thornton Ranch and the other ranches in the Galisteo Basin. At stake was the possibility that the vast landscape ultimately would be carved up into a hodgepodge of ranchettes.

"The Thornton family, which has owned this 14,700-acre ranch for 60 years, had sold some parcels off and they were looking for one buyer for the rest," Harrison said. "Over the course of three and a half years we've worked together, the family has come to recognize the value of the idea of concentrating development in the village and leaving the rest in open space."

The strategy is termed "conservation development." This sounds like an oxymoron but it possesses an inherent logic. It is unlikely that monies from public and philanthropic sources could pay for a land-conservation project of this scope. Conservation development has been practiced around the country by entities such as the Society for the

Protection of New Hampshire Forests and the Montana Land Reliance but in most cases the people who buy the typically expensive homes of the development clusters are the only ones who get to enjoy the land being conserved.

"This one is different," Harrison said, "not only because of its scale, 13,000 acres, but because, rather than just creating a high-end residential community with private open space — that is the simplest way to generate capital — the open space here will be public."

Harrison said Santa Fe County has the ability to partner with Commonweal on the development of public trails in the preserve but does not have the funding in place to maintain them.

"And that's the lesser challenge," he said. "The bigger challenge is restoration. The idea is to create a reverse stream to underwrite the restoration of the grasslands and riparian corridors that have suffered greatly."

The first assumption may be that cattle are to blame. Harrison said the land was damaged by many decades of sheep ranching a long time ago, then used by cattle since then, but the most destructive force (and the biggest restoration challenge) has been the recent drought.

During a prolonged drought, grasses die. With low-density grass cover to hold the soil in place when it does rain, the storm flows wash away more earth, cutting new arroyos and deepening existing arroyos. Erosion depletes the quality of the soil while more water flows off the land (in this case to the Galisteo Creek and thence the Rio Grande), preventing recharge of local aquifers.

The work on the Galisteo Basin Preserve will include the installation of rock check dams, modifying the banks of arroyos, and revegetation, all on a large scale.

Although the land needs help now, Harrison's first concern must be the village. As that project takes shape he and his cohorts at Commoswell have found it necessary to venture into new planning territory.

"When I started we thought we could focus on the basic principles of the village and then give it to a 'real developer,'" he said. "But we came to realize that to make the community complete and beautiful and infused with the values of environmental stewardship, which is our mission, we had to also play an active role in detailing the master plan."

A village-planning charrette produced ideas and sketches for a collection of arroyo homes, courtyard homes, hacienda homes, townhomes, and live-work units, as well as a series of detailed village studies.

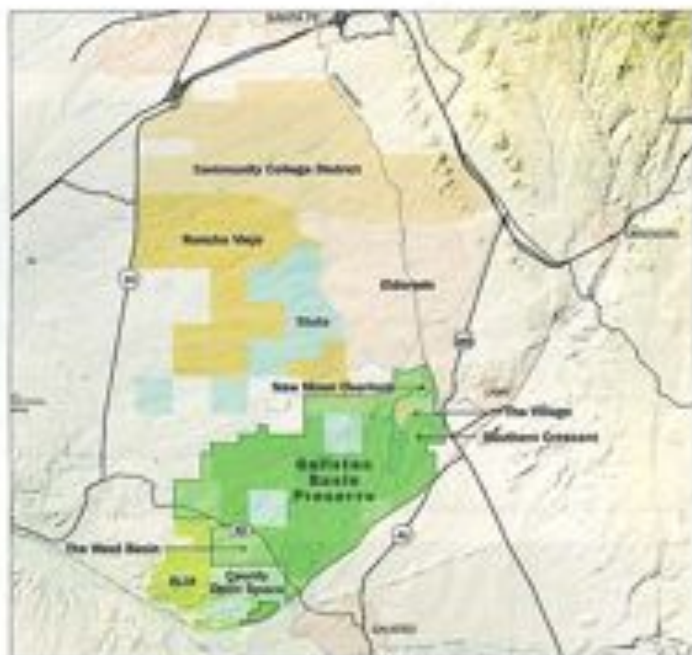
Commoswell is working with five firms to help develop an "architectural vocabulary" for the village. They are Suby Bowdon & Associates and Trey Jordan Architects, both based in Santa Fe; Miller Hill Partnership and Mathan, both from Seattle; and Lake/Flato of San Antonio.

The work of these architects can generally be called contemporary, modernist, even "edgy." Many of their buildings will remind the viewer of the structures featured in *Dwell* magazine.

"That's what we're counting on, that this is a community more reflective of what you'd see in *Dwell* than in *Architectural Digest* or *Metropolitan Home*," Harrison said.

"We're thinking of some homes as small as 750 square feet, maybe done in a Japanese boatmaking style, in a density similar to the new El Corazon condos near the downtown Santa Fe post office, and up to homes of 4,000 square feet, but this will not be a community of gigantic mansions."

The village promises to have a strong green-building element. "Our financing includes the Enterprise Foundation, Los Alamos National Bank, and the New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority, and the Enterprise Foundation requires a comprehensive green-communities protocol," he said. "So that means healthy buildings and energy efficiency and water catchment, and we will be able to do community-level water recycling."

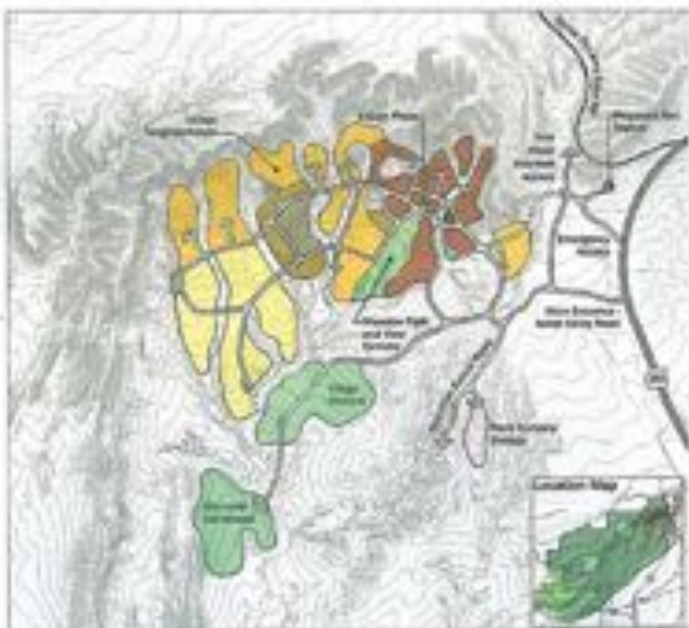


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The plan calls for the village to have its own wastewater-treatment plant and to use effluent from the plant to irrigate outdoor plantings and to flush toilets in all the houses.

The village is intended to be a "whole" community with schools and even a cemetery offering green burials.

Green cemeteries or eco-cemeteries have developed as an alternative to the traditional mortuary protocol. According to Wikipedia.com the body is "returned to nature in a biodegradable coffin or [cotton] shroud. Native vegetation (often a memorial tree) is planted over or near the grave in place of a conventional cemetery monument. The resulting green space establishes a living memorial and often forms a protected wildlife preserve."



The cemetery in the Galisteo Basin Preserve will be available to anyone who is interested, not just residents of the village, Harrison said. The current thinking at this early stage of the planning is that it would be limited to about 2,000 plots.

There are two school sites in the village plan. One will accommodate Charter School 37, a public, tuition-free high school already in operation in Santa Fe. The other will be for a grade school.

Ideas for the village center include a mercantile "on the model of the Trosque Village Market," Harrison said, and a cafe, post office, medical facility, chapel, outdoor amphitheater, and live-work spaces.

Little of the project will be visible to passersby. The village's planners employed GIS technology to situate the project so it will be completely out of view of people on U.S. 285 and largely out of view from N.M. 41.

The cattle are gone from most of the old Thornton Ranch now, but there are populations of pronghorn antelope and deer, an occasional bobcat, bear, elk, or mountain lion, "and a million jackrabbits," Harrison said.

Commoswell has adapted one of the many old windmills on the property to provide water for the herd of about 40 antelope that roams on the property's northern grasslands. An electric pump powered by a photovoltaic array replaces the mechanical, wind-driven pump. "Those things are ornery and it's difficult to find parts for some of them," Harrison said.

The Commoswell president anticipates that the village will be complete in 12 years. As the preserve's first phase of development, the organization plans to fund the village development through the sale of home sites in three projects: New Moon Overlook and Southern Crescent north and south of the village site, and West Basin on the preserve's western rim.

If everything happens as planned, the village will be home to about 2,300 people by the year 2020.

The residents of nearby Galisteo have expressed support for the Commoswell plan but some have had concerns

about possible impacts on their water supply.

"There are a lot of people on the Galisteo Planning Committee who have a lot of respect for Ted but they see him as a developer, whereas I see him as a conservationist," said Galisteo resident Lucy Lippard. "I happen to be more pro-Commoswell than some, and I for one feel what Ted is doing in terms of the open space and CS 37 is great."

"At the same time none us obviously wants anything to happen to our water supply, and I am perfectly sympathetic with those who don't want anything to happen out here."

"I may be naive," Lippard said, "but I think this Commoswell plan is the best thing around."