



The Railyard Park & Plaza

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Santa Fe began to dream and debate the future of the Railyard property 23-plus years ago. It took seven years to design, fund and build the Railyard Park and Plaza. Finally, the Railyard provides common ground for cultural organizations, artists and businesses, and is a welcome green jewel in the heart of Santa Fe.

It was a long wait. Sometimes the wait is worth it. Santa Fe built a very different – hopefully more efficient, sustainable – Railyard Park and Plaza than it would have had we started building in 1995, when the Trust for Public Land helped the City purchase the property from BNSF Railroad.

We live in interesting times, when globally, people are turning to significant innovations in sustainability; not just in technology, but also in thought and perspective. When The Trust for Public Land (TPL) asked Santa Fe residents what they wanted in a central park, they emphasized three things. First, they wanted the cultural and educational organizations currently in the Railyard – El Museo Cultural, Santa Fe Clay, SITE Santa Fe, the Farmers Market, Warehouse 21, the galleries, etc. – to be able to afford to remain there. And they wanted compatible new development.

The Santa Fe Railyard Community Corporation worked with the City to create leases that protect non-profit organizations from rising property values. The Trust for

Public Land worked with the Farmers Market to design the Railyard Plaza and ramada to accommodate market stalls. Warehouse 21 and the Farmers Market built new, permanent homes that enhance their capacity. Alvord Elementary is converting to a magnet school focused on sustainability (See article, page 56).

Buying locally is a core part of living sustainably. All businesses; local, regional and national, can contribute to sustainability by offering local goods, paying living wages for good jobs with opportunities for advancement, and supporting local organizations. It's up to us, the consumers, to reward good corporate citizenship, local or not, by spending thoughtfully. The Railyard businesses provide new opportunities to do that in Santa Fe.

Second among the public's priorities for the Railyard was a large park, specifically a "passive" park, a green place for many different social activities and solitude, reading and recreation. TPL, its advisors and design team created spaces for reflection, play and performance. The 400-plus new trees and thousands of baby plants are already bringing shade and wildlife back to downtown.

Third, and a word we probably heard more than any other, was "water." In a city guided by water restrictions that have set back the health of many parks, how do you create 12 acres of new plantings without a huge

new draw on the water supply?

The design team, Ken Smith, landscape architect, Mary Miss, public artist, and Fredric Schwartz, architect, were guided by their experiences in other communities – Santa Fe is not the only thirsty city – and by New Mexico experts in high desert xeriscape.

Large areas of the park, the cottonwood bosque along the Acequia Madre and the arroyo east of SITE Santa Fe, are intended to feel more like native places. They are filled with plants (and, hopefully, birds, insects and other animals) familiar to anyone who has walked a Northern New Mexico river or arroyo.

There is very little turf lawn on the park. Where there is turf, (a blend of tall fescue, perennial rye and Kentucky bluegrass developed for northern NM parks), it is placed where people will get the most out of it: within a few picnic areas and on a sloping lawn that faces a space for a temporary stage or movie screen.

But more was required to provide for the park's water "budget." Through a feat of design, engineering, and collaboration, TPL secured access to rainwater runoff from new and historic buildings on the Railyard, which is fed into five underground 15,000-gallon cisterns and the 35,000-gallon water tower on the Railyard Plaza. Powered by the elevation of the water tower (a pump raises some water into the tower), 110,000 gallons of rainwater can be distributed throughout the park by gravity. While water catchment is an ancient practice, irrigation on the Railyard Park will be an interesting modern-day test of a familiar strategy on a large scale.

Santa Feans who have tried digging a hole in the ground are familiar with our hard-packed clay-heavy soils and the caliche layer, a hard calcium carbonate deposit a few feet below the surface, which slow absorption and contribute to amazing run-off spectacles after big rains. Early in the earth-moving phase of park construction, the team dug 930 1-foot by 6-foot holes, piercing the caliche. They were filled with amended soils, creating a better sponge for any precipitation. If rain falls, the park will catch it, store it and put it to use.

Other practices are elegant and timeless. The Acequia Madre runs along the southeast edge of the park, parallel to Cerrillos Road. The park has leased a quarter-acre



SF Community Foundation's Billie Blair presides over burial of a time capsule containing wishes for Santa Fe's future at the Railyard Park opening, Sept., 2008

foot of water rights from the Acequia. On the park's water day, water will flow into what TPL calls the Acequia Niña. She runs underground first to a Pueblo-style demonstration garden and then above ground to a space for a future community garden near the corner of Alarid Street and Cerrillos Road, before returning to the Acequia Madre and off towards the Village of Agua Fria.

The Railyard has long been the place that brings people and goods from near and far to Santa Fe. As an active railyard (another priority articulated by Santa Feans), it will offer relevant avenues to a more sustainable life. The Santa Fe Southern Railway will continue its living representation of NM's railroad history with four-season rides through our beautiful surroundings. The Rail Runner Express will revive our historic depot as the northern destination of riders to and from Albuquerque, and stops in between.

A new bikepath/walkway parallels these historic tracks and links the Rail Trail (and its connection to the Arroyo Chamisa Trail) and the future Acequia Trail (behind the New Mexico School for the Deaf out to Baca Street) to the southwest with the Santa Fe River Trail to the north. From there, you can get to the Dale Ball Trails, then the Atalaya Trail or Windsor Trail. The Railyard Park forms a central hub to the emerging trail network that is becoming a real way to navigate our city safely and actively on foot or by bike.

We often look to the past to guide us to sustainability. It's odd that we should consider it forward-thinking to harvest rainwater, or buy locally, or get where we need to go by walking or pedaling, when people have done these things for centuries, and still do in most of the world. And while it may take some effort for many Americans to live more sustainably as individuals, it takes a lot of effort to prioritize sustainability in large-scale public projects. But it's worth it, and in Santa Fe, the people demanded it.

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