

PLACITANS SEEK TRANSFER OF BLM LAND TO U.S. FOREST SERVICE

—Ty Belknap, *Signpost*



Kathy McCoy (Representative, NM District 22), Reid Bandeen (Las Placitas Association), Brad Stebelton (Sandoval County Planning Division), Sarah Cobb (Senator Tom A. Udall's office, NM District 3), Martin Heinrich (US Representative for the 1st Congressional District of NM), Dan Dennison (Las Placitas Association), Orin Safier (Las Placitas Association), Mitch Johnson (Pathways), Bill Lenoir (Diamond Tail resident)

The Crest of Montezuma, located northeast of the Village of Placitas, is a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts. It is also a thriving wildlife corridor.

A working group has been brought together from two separate organizations—Las Placitas Association and Pathways: Wildlife Corridors of New Mexico—for the purpose of advocating the transfer of the approximately 1,000 acres of land in Placitas known as the Crest of Montezuma from the Bureau of Land Management to the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service (Cibola National Forest). Members of the group say that this transfer would provide better protection for this critical wildlife corridor under USFS management rules by keeping it free from commercial development and destructive recreational use by off-road vehicles while maintaining public access for low-impact uses such as pedestrian, equestrian, and mountain biking. The group will not pursue a more restrictive USFS Wilderness designation because the land does not meet the criteria.

The Crest of Montezuma is a colossal foothill located just northeast of the Village of Placitas, adjacent to the existing national forest that is part of the Sandia Ranger District. Some private land might also be included in the new USFS boundary (see map). The land is archeologically significant and provides a spectacular natural backdrop for land that has historically been sparsely developed for residential and agricultural purposes.

The process of seeking preservation of this land for open space began in 2003 during the height of the housing boom. Neighbors expressed concern that residential or commercial development would negatively impact the natural setting, so they looked for help and found the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national nonprofit land conservation organization. The TPL

met with Placitas residents and began discussions with the private landowners of the Crest about ways of protecting the land that would meet the needs all parties.

While BLM was interested in taking ownership, the agency did not have the funds to purchase the property within a time frame the landowners could accept. Some quick negotiating by TPL allowed Santo Domingo Pueblo to acquire the Crest property in November 2003. Santo Domingo held the property as a "conservation buyer" until they completed the exchange with BLM which was expected to take place in mid-2004.

As it turned out, the exchange took over three years to complete. BLM Albuquerque District Manager Ed Singleton told the *Signpost* that the process was delayed by real estate details and problems reconciling an old land grant survey. On August 16, 2007, the Bureau of Land Management released a Notice of Decision for the Santo Domingo Land Exchange.

During the time it took to iron out the details of the exchange, the BLM formed a loose partnership with Sandoval County to manage the land as open space. The county acquired seven acres of private land adjacent to the Crest and announced intentions to provide access to the property. A trailhead with an informational kiosk and restrooms were proposed, as well as construction of a new trail to existing trails on the first bench of the Crest. The BLM also planned to reduce hazardous fuel loading to protect the national forest and nearby subdivisions from wildfires. BLM officials said at the time that they planned to work with residents to create a plan to protect wildlife habitat and allow for low-impact recreational use.

The plans were put on hold when the BLM began the public process of updating the Rio Puerco Resource Management Plan (RMP) in 2008. Open space advocates were dismayed when the BLM announced that the Crest would join the other two BLM parcels near Placitas in the grab bag that would be sorted out by the RMP revision. It could be mined, drilled, driven, or developed. The planning process included extensive public input that called for preservation—so the Crest might well end up being open space as originally planned. Unfortunately, residents will have to wait until the revision is completed in 2012 to find out—unless the land can be transferred to the USFS where the management policies are already in place.

This transfer will require an act of Congress. Representative Martin Heinrich told the *Signpost*, "Numerous residents from the Placitas area have contacted me about how best to protect and manage the Crest of Montezuma. I've visited the area and I am committed to making sure public lands in New Mexico are well managed and accessible to visitors. I will continue to work with local residents to make sure we reach these goals." Advocates of the transfer hope that Heinrich will introduce the necessary legislation for the transfer if he is shown that such action is supported by his constituency.

Sandy Johnson of the Las Placitas Association says, "The BLM is not opposed to Forest Service management of the Crest and discussions between the two agencies regarding the transfer have begun. There will public forums at which community concerns will be addressed before the formal transfer can take place, but the community's support for the transfer needs to be communicated to Congressmen Martin Heinrich now."

A suggested format for written letters to Heinrich, as well as his address, can be found on the LPA website at www.lasplacitas.org issues.

