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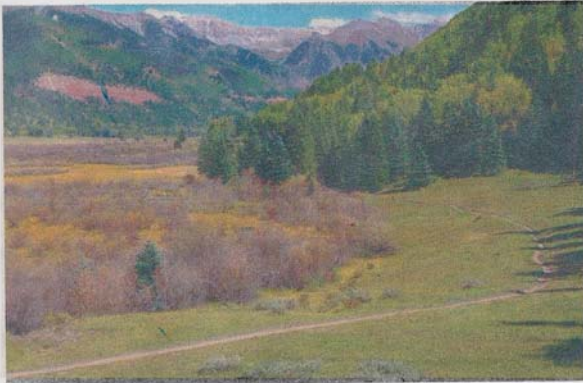
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THE WATCH

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COMMUNITY

Draft Valley Floor Trails, River Plan Revealed



A TRAIL on the West end of the Valley Floor near Society turn. (Photo by Brett Schreckengost)

completed a comprehensive environmental report on the property in March 2009.

In both cases ERC has gained additional technical support and expertise from ERO Resources Corporation, a Colorado-based natural resource and environmental consultancy.

"It's always better to start with what you'd like to do," as a way to avoid mistakes, Thompson said. "You want to avoid ending up with a project you don't like."

As presented, the plan proposed two major relocations of the San Miguel River and restoration along its entire Valley Floor length.

At an initial estimated cost of \$1.4 million, the first relocation would return the eastern stretch of the river located just downstream of the Pearl Property to its natural, meandering course from the straight, "completely impacted," channel created by humans in which it presently flows.

The existing channel would then be backfilled to create riparian and wetland areas.

"There are no natural characteristics left," Thompson said, noting that the stretch of the river has the lowest quality aquatic habitat of any portion flowing through the Valley Floor.

"You want to have a channel where you maximize in-stream habitat," he said.

Yet while returning the river to its natural course would create the deep pools, varied stream flows and other habitat needed for survival and

reproduction by fish and other aquatic species, it would also mean using heavy equipment to cut a new route into one of the property's most environmentally sensitive areas.

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Final Version Targeted For December

BY KAREN JAMES

TELLURIDE – Consultants unveiled a conceptual plan for Valley Floor trails and river restoration at a lightly attended public meeting last week that would increase pedestrian and bicycle trails on the 572-acre property and return the San Miguel River to a more ecologically functioning waterway.

At an estimated soup-to-nuts cost of around \$6 million (including

sewer line relocation, revegetation, bridges, monitoring and maintenance costs, and contingencies) to complete the project with professional crews, however, the consultants admitted that the vision was ambitious.

"This is what we would do if we could," said Troy Thompson, president of Ecological Resource Consultants, the Evergreen, Colo.-based firm retained to develop the plan.

Hardly newcomers to the property awarded to the town by the Colorado Supreme Court in June 2008 after a lengthy and costly condemnation battle, ERC

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If funding for the proposed relocation were secured, the community would still need to decide whether the benefits of such a project outweighed the costs.

"For my mind it's the most important [project], but it's also the most expensive," said Thompson.

Included in the cost projection is \$400,000 to deal with the sewer line that runs along the north side of the river in the railroad berm.

Exactly how to do so has not yet been determined, but ideas include insulating the sewer pipe and running it under a bridge and over the redirected river, burying it deeper in its existing alignment and pumping sewage through it (which would entail ongoing maintenance and operational costs), or moving it.

The other major project would restore the function of the confluence of Mill Creek with the San Miguel River for about \$1 million and would require a sizeable breach of the historic railroad grade that also contains the sewer line at that point.

Were the confluence functioning properly Mill Creek would drop directly into the San Miguel River. It instead hits the north side of the railroad berm, forming a pool and dumping sediment there before being directed back into the river through culverts located a few hundred feet from where the creek would naturally join the river, Thompson said.

A plan to rework the Valley Floor's existing trail network from its present 4.6 miles (excluding 1.3 miles on U.S. Forest Service land) to about 8 miles presented by ERO natural resource planner Bill Mangle came in at a much more easily reconciled cost of \$140,000 for the trail work alone. It increased by another \$400,000-\$700,000 when figuring in the cost of new bridges required by the changes.

The overall goal of the plan is to reduce trail user conflicts and to minimize new impacts and habitat fragmentation while limiting new routes, enhancing connections and providing varied experiences and distances from town.

"There are some concerns about conflicts mostly between bikes and walkers on the River Trail," said Mangle.

"We wanted to come up with a toolbox of potential solutions."

At the eastern end of the Valley Floor the plan proposes a trailhead that could be reached by way of a new trail running parallel to Mahoney Drive. If some sort of recreational structure were ever built, the trailhead, located near the Pearl Property ponds, would be the ideal location, according to Mangle.

"In my mind personally this is the only place where you would have more of a structure," he said.

Jennie Russell wondered about the impact of the trailhead, however.

"I have a big concern bringing people into that area; it's a quiet area, there's wildlife there," she

said. "I really don't want it to become like the kids fishing pool in town."

From that trailhead a new summer trail would depart from the River Trail on its north side and continue west for a short distance before returning to the River Trail to create a loop.

"It's really intended to provide another option for people on foot to disperse users," said Mangle. "Off the bat I would not restrict it to bikes, but I would design it so it's less attractive to bikes so you'll have that natural separation."

Like the relocated river stretch, the new trail would deviate into a more environmentally sensitive area and require a bridge to traverse the river.

Along the middle of the Valley Floor the consultants offered two recommendations in the event

the Mill Creek confluence were restored.

Because the project would create a large gap in the railroad grade one option would be to install a 120-foot bridge there. (After walking the property again following the meeting Thompson determined that two 60-foot bridges might be possible and more cost effective.)

The second recommended cutting a new trail from the railroad grade west of the confluence to ultimately run parallel with the existing bicycle path, requiring a smaller structure to cross Mill Creek.

While the new, northern route would avoid traversing sensitive habitat, neither option garnered overwhelming support.

"The trail up by the highway probably tends to not be where people want to be," San Miguel

Conservation Foundation director Gary Hickcox said of the second option, then likening the bridge indicated in the first option as "like the Golden Gate Bridge."

The consensus was to bypass the confluence by creating a loop somewhere between the two proposed routes.

Without the Mill Creek restoration there would be no gap created in the railroad grade. In that case Mangle recommended that it continue to be used as a trail.

"I personally don't like it as a trail, but it's existing, it's there."

Mangle recommended using the railroad corridor as a trail along the west end of the Valley Floor and creating a bridge at Eider Creek. An idea to connect the U.S. Forest Service portion of the River Trail with the Jurassic Trail in Mountain Village via privately owned open space got strong sup-

port, particularly from a handful of mountain bikers at the meeting.

"The difficulty there may be in the details," said Thompson.

As for winter trails, the proposed design would add roughly 3.5 kilometers to an existing trail system of 20 kilometers by establishing a new route east of Boomerang Road, but reduce the system by roughly the same amount by improving connections between existing trails.

"There would be a small increase in total trail distance in the winter but nothing too substantial," said Mangle.

The project could be completed in as little as two construction seasons if full funding were available. More likely, however, the timeline could extend over many years and rely on considerable volunteer efforts.