

Valles Caldera National Preserve

Listening Session #4

Erhart Senior Center, Los Alamos

March 9, 2001 6:00 - 9:00 pm

Summary of Discussion

Facilitator: Toby Herzlich

Recorder: Lucy Moore

Welcome and Introductions: Bill deBuys, acting chair and member of the board of the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP), welcomed the group to the listening session and expressed appreciation on behalf of the board to all those who took time to come and offer their thoughts on the future of the VCNP. Bill asked the other Board members present to introduce themselves. Present were: Bob Armstrong, Leonard Atencio, Karen Durkovich, Palemon Martinez, Stephen D. Stoddard, Thomas W. Swetnam, Dennis Vasquez, and David Yepa. Background: Bill introduced a brief video which gave background on the creation of the VCNP, and set the stage for discussion about its future.

DISCUSSION: Following the video, Lucy Moore welcomed the group, offered groundrules for the discussion, and explained her role as facilitator and recorder. A summary of the discussion would be sent to everyone who signed in, she explained, in order to keep in touch with residents of the Valley. The Board would want to continue the dialogue with those who attend the Listening Sessions, as their thinking evolves.

In general, the comments during the evening fell into three categories: visions for the future use of the VCNP, potential impacts and benefits to the community, and suggestions for management and decision-making processes. The comments summarized below do not represent any consensus among participants at the Listening Session.

VISIONS FOR THE VCNP: There was much discussion about the future use of the Valles Caldera, focusing on the following themes:

Minimal Environmental Impact: Many spoke in favor of uses that would result in the least possible abuse of the land and water. Some envision a VCNP with tent camping only and no motorized vehicles, to protect the land, the wildlife, the air quality, and the quiet of the area. Others would ban off-road vehicles, and limit motorized vehicles. Some felt single use roads were acceptable, but that inventory and monitoring would be necessary tools in determining whether or not these uses were acceptable. There were also concerns about visual impacts. There should be no over-flights of the area.

Preservation as is: A participant said "The Valle is the vision. Nothing more is needed." Another spoke of the Baca as a "friend," offering incomparable beauty in so many ways and at so many times - at dawn, in the moonlight with snow, in the spring with wild flowers, in the summer with cattle, and more. A participant asked the Board to make decisions which will protect "viewsheds," the beautiful long vistas which are possible in the Valle Grande.

"Let's not look back in twenty years and say 'Remember when,' or 'it used to be.' Let's make wise choices that will keep it the way it is."

Sustainability: The board was urged to make decisions about the property using the criterion of sustainability - sustainable environment, economy, and quality of life. The VCNP has the potential to add to the sustainability of the region.

The Board was encouraged to consider long term watershed restoration as a goal for the property, and use innovative permitting - for instance prohibiting motorized vehicles - to control potentially damaging uses like grazing or logging.

Balance of Uses: Participants spoke of the need to provide opportunities for a wide variety of uses. The uses should be balanced in ways that prevent one use from infringing on another, and that protect the environment to the maximum extent possible. "Every area does not need to be open to every use."

Value of Quiet and Dark: It was suggested that certain periods be reserved for quiet activities only, in order to preserve the beauty of the ambient sound. In addition, there was a plea to protect the nightscape from light pollution, through use of downward projecting lights, the use of timers, and regulation of brightness, where lighting is necessary.

Education Opportunities: Several mentioned the rare opportunity for students at all levels and researchers to spend time on the preserve studying all aspects of the resources. Specific topics might include: earth sciences, vulcanology, environmental sciences, natural history, cultural studies. Another suggested discrete access to universities for specific projects.

Many spoke of the need for interpretive centers, on a variety of subjects, including vulcanology. There are models of educational centers on volcanoes in other parts of the world, including Timafaya and the Isla Lanzarote off the African coast.

There are also education centers models closer to home, such as the one at Crow Canyon Archaeological Center near Cortez, Colorado, which is inviting to families, children and teens who are interested and may want to even do some research. Such centers could provide regional residents with important information on the history, culture, wildlife, geology and environment of the area.

Cross-country skiing: Several spoke of the unique opportunities for cross-country skiing in the Valle Grande, in the smaller valles in the back country, and on logging roads. Gentle terrain trails would benefit both beginning skiers (and mountain bikers) and those who want the opportunity for longer tours. A participant recommended a hut and trail system that would allow skiers with permits to have multi-day skiing excursions. The Board was urged to look at successful models for managing cross-country skiing, like the Millers' operation at Red River.

Trails: A participant offered a plan for a rim trail around the valles grande, one third of which would be on trust land. She felt that connecting these sections would be feasible, and urged that this study be included in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process for the preserve. The Los Alamos Pathways Association asked the Board to re-connect and put to use historic trails in the area, and offered education on trail ethics and natural resources.

Hiking: Several asked for hiking opportunities without trails.

Fishing: Fisheries resource needs protection, and perhaps fishing should be limited to catch and release. A participant suggested that the Rio Grande Cut-throat Trout be reintroduced.

Logging: A participant urged the Board to use local labor to thin forests with minimal impact to the environment.

Hunting: A participant was offended by the suggestion of a youth hunt, which she felt was sending inappropriate messages about violence and wildlife to young people. Another suggested there should be no hunting on the preserve.

Some participants felt that hunting was an important conservation tool, and that without it the over population of elk would lead to further degradation of stream banks and water quality, and to a weak and diseased herd.

Grazing: Participants hoped for grazing that is better managed, using techniques like cross-fencing, and innovations to insure maximum protection of the environment.

Mining: Mining should not be allowed, suggested some.

Filming: A representative of the New Mexico Film Commission asked the Board to consider the use of the VCNP for film locations for the movie industry. They are responsible users, she said, and can provide valuable income to local workers and to the VCNP.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITIES:

Traffic: The Los Alamos Shuttle Buses could be used during off hours and the weekends to transport people to the Valles Caldera for recreation with minimal impact.

Emergency Medical Care: Los Alamos may be the closest medical facility for those injured on the VCNP, and residents want to be sure that evacuation procedures are as efficient as possible, and that their facilities are ready to handle the task.

Gateway: Business representatives spoke enthusiastically about Los Alamos as "the best gateway" to the VCNP. They said that the community has shown its capacity to mobilize and support an initiative. "We want to be the gateway, to be an open gateway," said a spokesperson, "to erase our reputation as a place that keeps secrets. No more secrets." The Historical Society suggested using the Baker House for a reception center for the VCNP.

A participant envisioned the community serving as a regional gateway to northern New Mexico, with education and services in keeping with the natural, historic and cultural diversity of this part of the state. Another spoke of the value of the Los Alamos and Espanola region as a "good buffer" for the VCNP.

MANAGEMENT AND DECISION-MAKING: There was interest in the future management of the property and the role of the Board and local communities in making management decisions.

Planning Process: There was concern about the short time frame for planning, and the need to inventory resources, understand them well, and conduct research for answers that will guide wise planning choices. A plan is never complete, and should evolve to meet the needs of the area over time. Another said that the goal of planning should be a process not a product. A participant suggested that having one single, comprehensive and completed plan put the board in a vulnerable position. Different plans, covering different resources, uses or areas, offer more opportunity for flexibility and incremental implementation, and less chance for making big mistakes. Another urged that a plan be in place before development begins.

Partnering Opportunities: Many during the evening offered volunteer help or potential partnerships with other organizations or entities. [A separate list of these groups, together with names volunteered at other listening sessions, accompanies this report.]

Value of Local Expertise: The board was encouraged to use local labor and or volunteers for a variety of tasks on the preserve, including thinning forests, grooming and maintaining trails, search and rescue, etc.

Concessionaire Model: There was some concern that the concessionaire model of development can lead to abuses of the environment, and that the ten year lease offers little protection for the landowner. The Board was encouraged not to make decisions based on the potential to generate income.

Communication: The board was thanked for having these listening session, and reaching out to the community for ideas.

Affordability and Accessibility: Participants spoke of the need to provide access for the disabled, and suggested looking at models in Texas. They also warned against a fee structure that would exclude those with lower incomes who would be prohibited from enjoying the area. "We don't want to create a playground for the elite."

Permitting of Uses: There was support for permitting certain uses which could damage the environment, or the enjoyment of others, if not limited. These could include cross-country skiing (at least with overnight stays), camping, fishing, hunting, cutting timber, and motorized vehicular traffic.

Inventory and Monitoring: Many spoke of the importance of regular inventorying and monitoring the condition of the property and the impact of the uses, in order to refine the appropriate levels and types of uses on the VCNP.

Board Composition: A participant suggested that a representative of the State Game and Fish Commission should sit on the board.

Summary written by Lucy Moore. Please contact her with any comments or corrections. 505-820-2166, fax 505-820-2191, or email <lucymoore@nets.com>

Potential partners and sources of help:

The following groups offered to partner with the VCNP in a variety of ways

Gateway Coalition:

Los Alamos Chamber of Commerce
Los Alamos County Council
Bandelier National Monument
Friends of Bandelier
Los Alamos National Lab
University of California
University of New Mexico at Los Alamos
UNM Small Business Development Center
Lodgers Tax Board
Los Alamos Public Schools
Los Alamos Historical Society
Pajarito Environmental Education Center
Multi-agency Volunteer Task Force - John Hogan 662-5052, or Craig Martin 672-1962
Los Alamos Vision 20/20
Los Alamos Ski Patrol Search and Rescue
Wildlife Center - POBox 246, Espanola, NM, Dr. K. Ramsey, 753-9505
Back Country Horsemen - Chris Atkinson 689-2402
Los Alamos Nordic Club
Velo del Norte Cycling
Valles Caldera Rim Trail - 662-2662
Trout Unlimited, Truchas Chapter
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
New Mexican Stockmen's Association
Northern New Mexican Stockmen's Association - M.R.Pacheco 758-3168
Chicama Livestock Association - 753-1783
Ghost Ranch
Quivira Coalition
Museum of Natural History in Albuquerque
Los Alamos Pathways Association
Southwest 4WD Association
New Mexico Trout (Albuquerque)
National Park Service, National Natural Landmarks Program
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

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