

Valles Caldera Trust
Minutes of the Public Meeting – December 11, 2007
Santa Fe Community College
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Board members present

Bill Keleher, chairman
Steve Henry, secretary
Tracy Hephner
Dan Jiron
Jim Range

Staff present

Jeffrey Cross, Executive Director
Pam Dale, Human Resources
Rob Dixon, IT and Recreation Coordinator
Bob Parmenter, Preserve Scientist
Marie Rodriguez, Natural Resources Coordinator
Dennis Trujillo, Preserve Manager

I. Welcome and Introductions

Chairman Bill Keleher called the meeting to order at 1:08 pm and introduced Board members.

Approval of Agenda

Keleher asked the board for approval of the agenda. **Member Steve Henry moved and Dan Jiron seconded, and the agenda was approved.**

Approval of Minutes

Keleher asked that minutes of the September 6 meeting be approved. **Member Steve Henry moved and member Tracy Hephner seconded the motion to approve the minutes; the motion passed.**

II. Board business

Approval of Executive Session

Keleher asked the board to approve an executive session, should one be needed. **The motion was seconded and passed.**

Keleher asked the board to approve the following dates and locations for public meetings: March 14 in Albuquerque, June 12 in Jemez Springs, September 11 in Española and December 11 in Santa Fe. **A motion was seconded and passed.**

III. Operations

FY08 Budget

Executive Director Jeff Cross said the Trust transferred its budget and finance operations to the Albuquerque Service Center of the U.S. Forest Service, and he hoped to have final close figures

for FY2007 in another month or two. The Board approved a \$3.72 million budget for FY2007, which included \$3.5 million in appropriations, \$200,000 in carryover from FY2006, and \$20,000 from rental fees. Actual FY2007 expenditures were 91 percent of the amount approved. The Trust is operating under a continuing resolution in FY2008 and has authority to spend \$717,000, based on a \$3.5 million appropriation. Member Tracy Hephner said she appreciated having an understandable financial report.

IV. Existing Programs

Preserve Manager's Report

Preserve Manager Dennis Trujillo presented an update on programs implemented in 2007. Work began in July on the main entrance and State Highway 4, but had to stop because of weather. The first layer of asphalt was laid. Fences had been moved back to the existing gate, and temporary signs were used to manage traffic. The project will resume in May 2008 when a final asphalt layer will be laid and highway striping, gate and fencing, earthwork, and seeding of native grasses will be completed. He hopes to finish in mid-June.

Trujillo also reported on problems with the water system. Designed by the Forest Service in 2001, it uses an existing stream, La Jara Creek, to provide potable water for the Headquarters area of the Preserve. The earliest phases included building a treatment facility and laying distribution lines. The New Mexico Environment Department certified that the water was potable for public use in late summer 2007. Water is treated with a state-of-the-art UV system and storage capacity is 30,000 gallons. However, the stream has gone dry at times in the last two years and frequently experiences such high concentrations of sedimentation that filters must be changed daily.

In response to a question from member Steve Henry about filters, Trujillo said filters often have to be changed daily, and sometimes twice a day, to keep water moving through the system. He said that the former owners drilled several times attempting to secure well water, but he didn't know if they found sufficient water of good quality. It will be a continuing problem moving forward, he said.

On the subject of road maintenance, Trujillo said most of the funding invested in roads came from appropriated transportation funds. In 2007 the Trust applied for federal funds to complete the August 2006 open house long route, but didn't receive it. Thus far, only 14 miles of the 26-mile long route have been improved.

The Trust used appropriated funds to upgrade the analog radio system to digital communication, including two repeaters located on cerros Abrigo and Pelado. The Trust now has communications over most of the Preserve.

The Trust had 268 hunters over 12 hunt weekends in 2007. Hunters harvested 54 bulls out of 76 permits (71% success). The success rate usually averages around 80 percent. The Preserve does not have big bulls, but hunters were happy, Trujillo said. Hunters harvested 81 antlerless elk out of 190 permits (47% success). The Trust continues to collect demographic and condition data on elk taken during the hunt (80 to 100 samples a year). The first rifle hunt of the year is the most in demand.

Revenues from the hunt were \$284,000 from lottery sales and \$43,000 for the antlerless hunts, for a total \$327,055. The net to the Trust was about \$220,000. Trujillo said that the antlerless hunts were adopted by volunteer groups and individual volunteers. Volunteers, who enjoy the event, contributed 1,088 hours, which reduced the operation costs to the Trust. The NM Department of Game and Fish adopted the mobility-impaired hunt where hunters can shoot from vehicles; the volunteers helped retrieve animals.

Marie Rodriguez reported on the thinning project at Banco Bonito in the southwest corner of the Preserve. There are four units in the project, which was done in partnership with the Nature Conservancy and the Forest Service fire laboratory in Missoula. Thinning involved masticating the trees in place. The Trust will use prescribed fire to see how fire behaves in this fuel type.

Tom Jervis, of Caldera Action, asked if the four units were treated differently or alike, and Rodriguez responded that all units were masticated. In subsequent years, some will be burned, some will be left unburned.

For the 2007 grazing program, contractors Jack and Pat Hagelstein had a range rider apprenticeship program and a conservative program. They ran 530 yearlings, which were managed as a single herd. The program involved rapid rotation through pastures, daily herding and use of a high-energy supplement with no salt. The yearlings had been worked as a herd before coming to the Valles Caldera.

There were no incidents of brisket after the yearlings were brought to high altitude. They had planned to add animals mid-season or sell half and bring in more. One ranch hand was seriously injured on the preserve. That left just the Hagelsteins on site to manage the herd, but there were no adverse effects on the Preserve.

Trujillo expected to issue an RFP for grazing in 2008 by mid-December with a decision in early February. Tracy Hephner asked rate of gain in 2007; Trujillo said it was about 2 pounds a day, less than normal.

Tom Jervis, of Caldera Action, asked what the financial result of the grazing program was. Trujillo responded that the preserve netted about \$6,000. There were no operation costs, although some staff members volunteered their personal time.

Rob Dixon, recreation coordinator, reported on the 2007 recreation program. Core events were elk hunting, fishing, wagon and sleigh rides, hiking, tours, equestrian trail rides, cross-country skiing and snow-shoeing. The Trust received its 2007 budget about halfway through the year was a challenge. The Trust was late in hiring seasonal staff and late in advertising events. Regarding safety, there were two visitor incidents – one overuse injury and one fall from climbing a fence. In 2007, revenues increased by 10 percent over 2006. The goal for 2008 is to increase revenue by 15 percent.

Tracy Hephner asked if the two visitor injuries triggered claims against the Trust's insurance policy and Dixon said no.

The Trust receives 67 percent of recreation revenues from hunting and 12 percent from fishing. Most visitors are drawn by special events like hunting and fishing. In 2007, the Trust offered one-hour tours for people driving in off Highway 4; that activity drew 600 people. Activities with increased visitation included trail riding, fishing, hunting, hiking, skiing and snow-shoeing. Activities with fewer visitors were sleigh and wagon rides. Total visitation was 12,405, up 25 percent from 2006.

Discussing customer service and volunteers, Dixon said the Public Lands Interpretative Association answered 4,500 calls and volunteers donated nearly 2,400 hours. Volunteers staffed Highway 4 pullouts so that when people stopped to look at the Preserve, there was someone to talk with them about the Preserve and activities offered that day.

Preserve Scientist's Report

Preserve Scientist Bob Parmenter said the Preserve enjoyed good snowpack and an excellent monsoon period in 2007. The valleys had excellent forage production. It was the wettest year in the last four years. The Preserve is getting warmer based on four years of data.

Parmenter said 2007 was a record year in the production of four different vegetation types, thanks to two wet years in a row. Just 20 percent of forage production was used. The 530 yearlings were well dispersed so there was little impact on sites. Work in grazable woodlands, mountain meadows and mountain valleys showed that Arizona and Idaho fescues did well, as did Kentucky bluegrass. Six different fenced ungulate exclosures showed the same patterns.

The cultural resources inventory recorded 67 new archeological and historical sites, and inventoried 11 miles of road, in 2007. Parmenter estimates that 10 percent of the Preserve has been surveyed.

Tom Jervis, of Caldera Action, asked if Parmenter had data from the exclosures. Parmenter said he didn't have numbers but could provide them later.

V. New Programs

Action Item: Overnight Camping

Executive Director Jeff Cross proposed that the Trust implement a new stewardship action for overnight camping and asked the Board to authorize planning. Under the Trust's NEPA implementation procedures, he found no categorical exclusion for camping, so the Trust would need an Environmental Assessment (EA).

Cross explained that he wasn't proposing overnight camping as a stand-alone activity, but as an addition to existing public recreation programs and for administrative uses, like research and maintenance. He proposed an interim program for overnight camping at various sites using previously disturbed areas. This could increase the efficiency of contractors, volunteers and others working on the Preserve; staff working in remote areas; and fire and search-and-rescue personnel. It would also allow collection of information for future planning.

Camping would be limited to existing public activities at the discretion of Trust and use of vehicles would be at the discretion of the Trust. Camping would be supported by portable toilets, trash would be packed out, and locations would not be used more than four times a year. An EA could be completed in spring or early summer of 2008.

Cross clarified that he wasn't proposing to develop campgrounds for backcountry camping. He noted that participation in the equestrian program doubled in 2007. Riders travel a long distance with their horses, and have to come and go in one day because there is no place to stay with their horses. Camping could increase participation in the program, add value and generate revenue.

Member Jim Range asked if camping would be done in association with existing public programs. Cross said yes. An interim overnight camping program would allow staff to gauge public response and look at logistical problems, including the impact on staff, oversight, water, and toilets. The Trust would gather information as they have with other programs to use in long-term planning.

Member Dan Jiron asked what the sequence of activities would be. Cross said they could implement the program next summer. Between that time and completion of the long-term management plan in about two years, useful information could be collected.

Member Tracy Hephner said she continued to be concerned that the Preserve is not covered by the federal insurance pool. She asked about impact on the Trust's insurance policy. Dennis Trujillo responded that they had no information from the insurance agency and would find that out.

Steve Henry made a motion to authorize overnight camping on an interim basis for administrative and existing public programs; he directed staff to prepare an EA, seek public comment and develop a cost-benefit analysis. These things have to make money, he said. This place won't exist in eight years if it can't sustain itself. **Jim Range seconded.**

Member Dan Jiron asked if staff would bring the issue back to Board. Cross responded that trustees would authorize an EA, and staff would come back to the Board before starting the program. Trustees would know how it would be implemented and how impacts would be mitigated.

Member Tracy Hephner said she struggled with the question of camping and had a hard time supporting it. For her to be comfortable with the idea, she needed an estimate of costs. Secondly, she didn't think the Board had a process in place to fairly determine who can camp and use the Preserve.

Dan Jiron said he shared some of those concerns. When the board considers the EA, is it possible to address those kinds of questions? Cross responded that campers and costs are downstream questions. He was asking for authority to develop an EA for the activity. The economic analysis would be a stand-alone, activity-by-activity analysis. No camping will occur until the EA is done. Staff followed similar procedures with elk and turkey hunting programs.

Tom Jervis said that as a volunteer on the Preserve, he believed overnight camping was an idea whose time is long overdue. There is a strong need for camping to relieve pressure on facilities and reduce traffic on roads. It would increase the efficiency of programs.

Monique Schoustra, of Caldera Action, asked why the Trust is not allowed in federal insurance pool. Hephner said the Trust was excluded from its inception. Initially, the Trust was responsible for fighting fires and addressing tort claims. In 2005, Congress agreed that the Trust would not be responsible for fire suppression and amended the Valles Caldera Preservation Act, but it did not change the tort claim language. It was difficult for the Trust to get insurance because insurers had never insured an entity like the Preserve. Currently, liability and vehicle insurance costs about \$40,000 a year.

Monique Schoustra asked about the process for people to propose unique events. Cross responded that staff will work with people who want to initiate an activity on the Preserve, but there is no written policy or process. Dixon added that in the past, all activities were initiated by staff.

The motion was approved.

Action Item: Public Access and Use Planning

Cross said the Board previously directed staff to prepare a proposal for public access and use planning. Staff returned with a proposed stewardship action at the December 2006 public meeting, and the Board authorized staff to proceed with information collection (phase 1). This resulted in four public meetings held in summer 2007. Cross asked for authorization to begin the formal NEPA planning process (phase 2).

Chairman Bill Keleher explained that the Trust is charged by statute with several objectives, including financial sustainability and fair access. The outlook for continued appropriations is bleak. Revenue generated by activities is low, while it costs \$3 million a year to operate. The Trust needs to know how much money could be generated from different activities and had already asked staff to issue an RFP to develop a business plan.

Member Jim Range said he didn't know if the Trust can be self-sustaining, but it must look at options to raise revenue. The Board will make decisions, and the public will be involved in those decisions. Because it's untenable to go on as it has, the Board needs to understand its options and move ahead with the RFP.

Member Steve Henry said the Trust makes about \$500,000 a year from public recreation now and needs \$5 million a year to operate. The RFP should be awarded to a consultant with the experience to work with staff and Board members.

Member Tracy Hephner said the Board needs to look at economic, environmental, and social impacts. She expects lively discussions.

Cross said that Phase 1 was the four workshops, attended by 120 people. The values they prized were beauty, pristine landscapes, solitude, silence, land characteristics, resources (wildlife,

archeology), history and culture, public use and access, and recreation activities. Participants said infrastructure could include a visitor center, conference facility, restaurant, and lodging, which could range from rustic to high end. Trails could be used for different activities. The Preserve could have multiple access points. Participants wanted more sophisticated activities, but didn't make the connection between a quality experience and what that takes in staff and infrastructure. They also heard conflicts between activities, such as grazing and fishing.

Member Tracy Hephner explained that the workshops were pre-NEPA scoping sessions. Members of the public said they wanted to provide input before the Board and staff chose alternatives. Cross said that the summer 2007 meeting and workshops, and the upcoming business plan, will frame the scope of stewardship actions.

Tom Ribe, of Caldera Action, asked if they weighted responses from the workshops, and if there was more interest in any particular activity. Cross responded that the process was intended to learn about interests. At such an early stage of planning, it's not appropriate to decide preferences. The workshops weren't a vote; they were information gathering.

Ribe also asked about the cost of the consultant for the public meetings. Cross responded that the Trust issued an RFP and received bids ranging from \$30,000 to \$90,000. The cost was \$51,000 for the contract; rental of facilities was an additional cost, along with staff time. The total cost was about \$100,000 including staff, which spent a lot of time on preparations for the open house.

Tom Jervis asked if the business plan, which is an integral part of visitor use and access, is also part of a sustained-use plan. Hephner responded that the business plan will look at all activities on the Preserve.

Tracy Hephner moved that the board proceed with Phase 2. Steve Henry seconded. The board approved.

A question came up about the livestock grazing program. Cross said staff would begin planning for a new grazing EA. The Trust held two public workshops in 2007, had completed an existing forage condition report, and held a public Board meeting at Tierra Amarilla where trustees had an opportunity to discuss grazing on the Preserve. The staff is working on a draft of the EA and will submit it to the Board for review. It will then be released for public comment. Chairman Bill Keleher asked for a committee of Board members to work on this; Jim Range, Tracy Hephner, and Keleher agreed to serve on the committee.

VI. Public Comment

Tom Ribe, of Caldera Action, said that the business planning process is a private-sector idea that is seeping into the public sector, but public lands aren't really businesses. Still, he thought it was a valid process for trustees and the public. A business plan may come up with some new ideas. He asked how future planning process is envisioned.

Member Jim Range said he asked the same question and that Jeff Cross gave a good answer. With environmental planning and the scientific work, staff created a baseline of knowledge about

resources. The Preserve is different from other public lands in that the statute requires it to become self-sustaining. The Trust is trying to take a responsible approach to those issues.

Cross said you need to know your resources to do effective planning. During the Trust's first five years, it was learning about the natural and cultural resources through scientific investigations, infrastructure assessments, and testing recreation programs with the public. The Board is now in a position to make decisions. The business plan will be in lockstep with broader public access and use planning. The plan will identify activities that could be implemented. The Trust will develop a series of alternatives that vary in infrastructure development, public programs and levels of visitation. The public will be involved in developing alternatives.

Monique Schoustra asked about working with outfitters and guides, who could be a revenue source. Cross responded that a question that will be addressed in the business plan will be whether the Trust should manage public activities themselves or engage concessioners.

VII. Adjournment

Bill Keleher adjourned the meeting at 4:30 pm.