

**Statement of Sen. Dede Feldman on the Ditches with Trails Pilot Project  
before the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy Board 7/28/08**

Thank you members of the Conservancy Board for hearing tonight the diverse concerns North Valley residents have about the Ditches with Trails Project. My name is Senator Dede Feldman and I represent District 13 in the North Valley, including parts of the North Valley and Los Ranchos. I am the primary sponsor of capital outlay monies from the legislature for the Ditches with Trails project and for many other projects affecting the Conservancy and the bosque, including funds for bosque restoration, fire suppression, and a bosque council, which morphed into the Bosque Consortium way back in 1997. I have long considered myself a friend of the District and, at your request in 2007, I sponsored and passed SB 486, which eased the Conservancy District's liability for recreational activities on trails running along side of the ditches.

First, a little history of this Ditches with Trails Project, from the perspective of an elected official who gets a lot of requests for funding that do not have community and neighborhood support, and which are disconnected from other, existing publicly funded facilities. I don't respond to those requests but I did respond to a series of requests and statements of

support in 2005, 2006, 2007 coming from a broad-based coalition of neighborhoods, and local governments for funding of the North Valley Demonstration Project along the Griegos drain.

Those groups included:

- The North Valley Coalition of Neighborhoods, a group of approximately 15 neighborhood organizations which for two years prioritized the project as their top funding request
- The National Park System—Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program
- The Village of Los Ranchos
- The City of Albuquerque's Open Space Division
- Bernalillo County Commission
- The Vecinos del Bosque Group in the South Valley
- The New Mexico State Park Division and
- The Conservancy District itself, which sent me letter of support in Feb of 2006.

The stewardship project proposed by these groups was a multi-year, multi-jurisdictional process to preserve and enhance the valley's system of irrigation ditches and drainage canals as a continuous and interconnected system of waterways and trails. At no time was paving the ditches, or urbanizing the trail structure advanced. The idea, initially, and, at present, was to tread lightly, preserve the rural ambiance, and make some minor improvements for the sake of safety and continuity. The project resonated with me, not only as an avid ditch walker and an early supporter of preserving open space at Anderson Field, but as a policy maker who had

heard complaints from constituents about local ditches that had been closed down from disuse and double taxation that yielded little tangible benefit to non-irrigators in the North Valley. That's why I was so pleased at the Conservancy's endorsement of this idea, which came to my attention at huge kick-off meeting at the Albuquerque Museum in 2005, after which a Ditches with Trails Committee was formed, and planning began.

In the following years, the public was engaged through a number of a community forums, working groups, site visits, community walks, ditch cleanups, and so forth. Feedback on the project to me was overwhelmingly positive. People consistently told me of their love of the ditches and the need to preserve them with better connections, safer crossings, and directional signs.

One of the most impressive things about this project is the degree that public input has been solicited by both the Ditches with Trails Committee and Bernalillo County, which held a three day workshop in December to gather design ideas and community input. Over 100 people attended that event.

Meanwhile, the Conservancy District did its part to gather input with a ratepayer survey, which ultimately revealed that the overwhelming number

of respondents would like to see their taxes used to enhance the ditches and drains as recreational amenities.

Tonight you have heard the feasibility report, which I believe summarizes the desires of folks whom I have hear from, who wish enhance the drain in our area, which has become a catchment area for trash and dog waste, and a dangerous proposition for those who wish to cross the lateral or access the open space at Los Poblanos, a publicly owned tract, in which the public has invested millions of dollars.

Contrary to the messages that many members of the North Valley community have received, most recently in anonymous flyers passed out up and down Rio Grande Blvd. —there was never, from the project’s inception at a meeting in the Albuquerque Museum—to the capital outlay appropriation which has funded this project—to the community meeting at the Good Shepard of the Valley Church in December-- there has never been any underlying intent to pave over, or urbanize the ditch network that we love so much in the North Valley.

So, I urge you to soldier on with this process, amidst the conflicting opinions, jurisdictions, and uses of this important community asset.

And I hope you will consider very carefully the message that a

disapproval of this cooperative, multi-community, multi-jurisdictional project would send to the legislature, to the vast majority of your own ratepayers who do not utilize MRGCD ditches for irrigation, and most importantly the public. The credibility and the commitment of the Conservancy District to allowing the public to use its ditches for trails, for recreation is at issue—and your decision will have grave implications for the future, for the planned Rio Grande Trail for example, and for other recreational uses of the ditches that you once said you were committed to. For this reason I am asking you to defer any action on the Ditches with Trails Project tonight, particularly the North Valley pilot project.

Thanks for hearing me out and I am happy to make myself available later for any questions about the capital outlay process or the recently completed bridge over the Griegos lateral.

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<http://www.dedefeldman.com>