



September 10, 2020

Board of Trustees

Town of Rico, Colorado

Dear Trustees:

The purpose of this letter is to provide the Board of Trustees with some brief background information on the Rico Trails Alliance (“RTA”) and the history of the joint USFS/Town/RTA river trail project.

RTA was formed in 2017 by a group of Rico trails enthusiasts in order to establish and maintain a network of non-motorized trails in and around the Town of Rico in partnership with the Town and the U.S. Forest Service (“USFS”). RTA’s top trail project priority is a multi-use river corridor trail along the Rio Grande Southern (“RGS”) railroad grade that runs through the Town’s River corridor dedication area south along the east fork of the Dolores River and terminates at the Dolores Montezuma County Line (“RGS River Trail”).<sup>1</sup>

In August of 2018, the USFS issued a Record of Decision for its Rico-West Dolores Roads and Trails Travel Management Project. With input from RTA, the USFS identified the RGS grade as a critical non-motorized link. The Town’s Board of Trustees unanimously supported designation of the RGS grade as a USFS trail area because it enhances and extends the Town’s River corridor dedication project by over 4.5 miles south of Town. (*See attached July 25, 2017 letter from Town to USFS, highlight added*). The Town’s River corridor dedication project is nearing completion after years of work. In a September 2019 Scoping Notice for the Rico Trails Project, the USFS formally initiated the planning process for designating the RGS River Trail as a multi-use non-motorized forest system trail on USFS lands. RTA and the Town have since participated in multiple comment periods and RTA has spent much time fundraising and gathering public support for the project.

Local hikers, runners, mountain bikers and fly fishers have recreated in this area for decades. Compared to the steep surrounding terrain, the gentle RGS grade is accessible to all users. From beginner and intermediate hikers, cyclists and nordic skiers to families with small children or even senior users, the RGS will round out Rico’s recreation opportunities. This combined with the historic structures that dot the RGS grade (i.e., stone coke ovens, coal chutes, railroad trestle remnants, etc.) make the RGS River Trail an incredible amenity and conservation opportunity for the Town and surrounding areas.

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<sup>1</sup> RTA’s other two major USFS trail projects are Circle Trail extending from the Colorado Trail down to Town and a reroute of the Ryman Creek Trail, which extends between the Colorado Trail and Highway 145 about 4.5 miles south of Town.

Joining the north and south ends of the RGS River Trail requires permission, in the form of a perpetual easement, to cross a 54-acre parcel of private property. RTA, and then the Town, began negotiating with these property owners over two years ago. After negotiations stalled for almost a year, the private property came under full ownership by Mike Popek. Mr. Popek agreed to provide an easement through his property. A copy of his signed the Recreational Trail Easement is included in the Town Board's September 16, 2020 meeting packet. Until now, private inholdings along the river inhibited public access to the RGS grade, the river and the San Juan National Forest. As a condition of granting access through his property, Mr. Popek designated a trail alignment that would work with his site planning. For this reason, some of the RGS trail's alignment on the Popek property is not on the historic RGS railroad grade. A worthwhile compromise given that without such access, the RGS trail's route from Town would have ended at the north edge of this property, and would have required trail users to travel on or along the highway to reach the County line.

In addition to access, the Recreational Trail Easement allows for construction of new sections of trail, trail signage, winter grooming, trail maintenance and the installation of a pedestrian bridge. The pedestrian bridge would cross the river in the historic RGS bridge location adjacent to the stone coke ovens.<sup>2</sup> This site provides the most, and practically speaking the only, feasible location for a bridge and the quickest means of regaining the RGS railroad grade on USFS land south of the Popek property. We also believe that by installing the bridge at this location we can more deeply connect to the history of our area, as it nods to the former bridge from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

RTA has contributed countless hours of volunteer time and funding to the RGS River Trail project. RTA paid for the cultural assessment required by federal law for USFS trail designation. The trail's alignment was surveyed by RTA's volunteer surveyor, Dave Bulson. The Recreational Trail Easement was drafted by RTA's pro bono attorney, Nicole Pieterse. RTA undertook these efforts so that the Town would not have to. Additionally, RTA and the Town are joint applicants for a Colorado Parks and Wildlife planning grant to fund the engineering, design and assessments for the bridge that are necessary for obtaining a GOCO grant for funds to construct the bridge. RTA is providing matching funds for both grant applications.

Furthering its investment in the RGS River Trail, RTA will construct the new sections of the RGS River Trail, improve the existing sections of trail and install gates and signage using RTA's volunteer trail builders and funds.<sup>3</sup> A proposed draft Memorandum of Understanding outlining all of these RTA commitment to the Town's River Corridor/RGS Trail project is attached for the Town Board's review. RTA representatives will also be present at the September 16, 2020 Town Board meeting to answer questions.

Sincerely,

RICO TRAILS ALLIANCE

By:   
Alex Wing (Sep 16, 2020 17:17 MDT)

Alex Wing, President

<sup>2</sup> The coke ovens lie partially on Popek's property and partially on USFS property.

<sup>3</sup> RTA funds its projects through a combination of grants, fundraising events, Osprey Pro Deal donations, and private donations.