

Shaking the Disappearing Railroad Blues

Rails-to-Trails for Santa Fe: Preserving and repurposing historic rail beds for education, recreation and non-motorized transportation

By Tim Rogers

The value of an old, abandoned rail bed is in the eye of the beholder. Developers and highway engineers mostly see uneven topography that needs to be flattened. Motorcyclists may see a wonderful, consistent berm to charge up and jump off of. Hikers and bicyclists and their canine companions may find a perfectly even grade to follow, though they may or may not understand why it is there. Railroad buffs may come to see a disappearing slice of history. But most people don't seem to see anything at all.

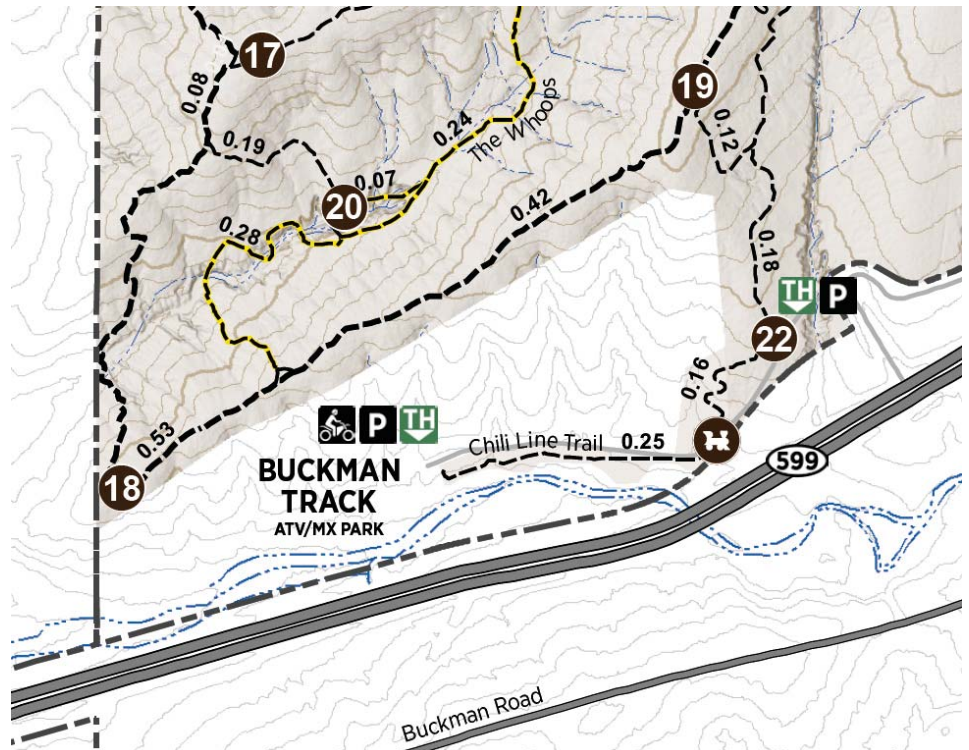
A dozen years ago, the writers of the La Tierra Trails Master Plan did not feel that the historic Chili Line on city land in and around Buckman Motocross Track even warranted mention.

Through the La Tierra Chili Line Trail, the Santa Fe Conservation Trust has recently worked with the City of Santa Fe and local volunteers to demonstrate that our local abandoned rail beds represent a unique opportunity to combine historic preservation and education with active recreation and transportation. Carved out of an as-yet unused portion of the Buckman motocross track in La Tierra Trails, this project has resurrected a nearly quarter-mile section of the old Denver & Rio Grande Western (D&RGW) rail grade north of the Relief Route as an interpretive trail. The goal is to eventually connect from this humble segment around the motocross track to more of the old Chili Line west of La Tierra Trails that is already arguably the best rail-to-trail in northern New Mexico, though not one that is formally recognized or publicized.

This Fall, you can visit both of these Chili Line trails on a "Vamonos" community walk on September 19 at 5:30 pm, meeting at La Tierra Trails Motocross Track Parking Lot off of the Relief Route (details on this and other Vamonos walks can be found at sfct.org/vamonos).

Unlike rails-to-trails elsewhere in the country, where long stretches of freshly abandoned railroads have given rise to slick, wide and continuous paved walk-and bike-ways, our prospects in northern New Mexico primarily consist of narrow, eroded alignments where countless trestle bridges and wood box culverts disappeared 80-100 years ago, where the old continuous railroad "right of way" was long ago fragmented into the hands of countless adjoining landowners along the way, and where new roads and housing subdivisions have sprung up with

that has served as a model around the country for pursuing trails along active rail lines. A small portion of it south of Zia Station, however, is also a "rail-to-trail" as it was built atop a piece of the Santa Fe Southern Line, including a wonderful wooden trestle bridge, that was abandoned when the NM Railrunner moved the active line closer to St Francis Drive. Similarly, another piece of the old Santa Fe Southern south of Rodeo Road that was abandoned when I-25 was built is prioritized in our Metropolitan Bicycle Master Plan to be repurposed as a trail



A portion of the 2024 Foothill Trails Map showing the new Chili Line Trail in the La Tierra Trail system and the "Choo Choo" junction. Source: City of Santa Fe Foothill Trails Map, 2024.

little regard to our urban periphery. But where significant pieces of the Chili Line, the New Mexico Central, and other local abandoned rail lines remain and can be accessed and even re-united, forgotten "history" becomes accessible, fun, and even useful to lovers of open space and trails.

Our best-known rail trail, the Santa Fe Rail Trail, is in fact a "rail-with-trail"

providing direct access from the Rail Trail to neighborhoods to the southwest, along Galisteo Road.

Other old rail beds in our area that once might have become formal trails are rapidly disappearing. With the development of the Cerro del Norte subdivision along the Rail Trail now underway, the last remaining pieces of the old rail spur that used to serve

Brun's General Hospital in the 1940s are barely discernible south of the Mid-Town campus, with no apparent intent to save or commemorate the line there. The remains of the New Mexico Central Railroad, meanwhile, are nearly impossible to find in the City of Santa Fe unless you are near the Railyard on the Acequia Trail—part of which is indeed a beautiful, paved “rail-to-trail”—or on Flagman Way, which is essentially a “rail-to-road.”

An exception can be found on and around the campus of Piñon Elementary School, where both our Metropolitan Bicycle Master Plan and our Safe Routes to School Action Plan envision a trail connection to Pueblos del Sol Trails via the only other visible remains of the NM Central Railroad in the city. SFCT has worked with school staff and families to organize several special “walk-to-school” days using this route, which represents a fraction of the 1.5-mile+ road route that families that live south of the school must otherwise use. We have met with Santa Fe Public Schools, City Parks Department, and other prospective partners to work toward the establishment of a formal trail here.

But Santa Fe County south of I-25 is where the most exciting prospects are to be found for rails-to-trails on the New Mexico Central Railroad, starting with a 6/10-mile section across the Arroyo Hondo between Oshara Village and the Santa Fe Community College that SFCT is currently seeking to jumpstart as a dirt trail under its “GUSTO”

community trail partnership. The real “mother lode” lies south of Rancho Viejo’s District Trail, which was built along the abandoned NMCRR line and could be extended, hopefully directly on rather than just along the railbed, to the community of Eldorado, which is amazingly only 2.5 miles away from the south end of Rancho Viejo, as compared to the 15-mile distance to travel by automobile. Now we are talking not

just recreation but a bona-fide modern transportation value to a rail line that last served as a transportation corridor nearly 100 years ago!

Tim Rogers is the Trails Program Manager for Santa Fe Conservation Trust and has been helping communities plan for and promote bicycling, walking, and trails throughout the state for over twenty years.



Top: Historic photo of Chili Line Train, across from the Ortiz Dog Park along Camino de las Crucitas. Note the trestle bridge behind the train. Photo by Otto Perry, 1938. Bottom: In another area nearby, today, one can see the remains of the rail bed before completing trail work. Photo by Tim Rogers.