

Trails and Towers

El Camino Real and the Verde Power Line in Santa Fe County

Introduction

El Camino Real begins in Mexico City and travels 1600 miles north – entering the US at what is now El



Paso. It continues north and passes west of Santa Fe to end at the long-gone town of San Gabriel or the still lively Pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh.

Today we call this trail El Camino Real, its Spanish name, the Royal Road and date the US portion from 1598. But clearly Native Americans traveled it earlier – much earlier.

There are 1,200 miles of El Camino Real in Mexico. Portions of this are recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites. (UNESCO -- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)

In the year 2000, Congress voted the 400 miles of El Camino Real in the US as a National Historic Trail. Responsibility for the trail was given to the National Park Service – and – the Bureau of Land Management.

From <https://www.nps.gov/elca/planyourvisit/>

Unhappily, we have built a lot of highways in the last 400 years and most of El Camino Real in the U.S. is paved – it's pavement with an occasional sign that says *El Camino Real*. Let's face it – Interstate 25, for example, does not look much like the trail Native Americans traveled in say 1300.

Part I

But we are lucky in Santa Fe County -- because here the old trail takes off into open country – it heads to the north-northwest roughly following what is today the Old Buckman Road – a dirt road.

Right now --Santa Fe County is about to start building the historic trail – the Buckman Road Segment of El Camino Real along the old Buckman Road. It will be the longest single trail section of El Camino Real in the United States.

It will be an amazing trail, costing \$4 million plus dollars, largely funded by the Federal Highway



Administration, through its Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP). It will link to the Santa Fe River Trail, and eventually, residents and tourists will be able to travel by trail from Patrick Smith Park on the far side of Santa Fe Plaza to the historic, recreational, and scenic opportunities in the public lands to our west – trails in the National Forest and on BLM land; Diablo Canyon and rock climbing, the Rio Grande, and Buckman Mesa/Otowi Peak with its spectacular views of White Rock Canyon. 14.7 miles, non-motorized, for pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians, it could be a spectacular attraction for our residents and for tourists from around the world.

Nov 16, 2016, an environmental assessment of the Buckman Road segment was published by the Federal Highway Administration, the Forest Service, and BLM. (*El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail, Buckman Road Segment, Retracement Trail Project.*)

To quote:

“The Buckman Road segment of El Camino Real . . . National Historic Trail is an unusually iconic segment of the historic route . . . The fact that this segment of the historic trail route still exists in federal ownership so close to population centers in Santa Fe is a remarkable opportunity for residents and tourists to experience one of the oldest routes of any National Historic Trail in the country.

“The proposed action would provide a unique opportunity to develop a non-motorized trail that serves the intent of Congress in establishing the National Historic Trail for the purpose of providing

Santa Fe New Mexican, 2/20/2016

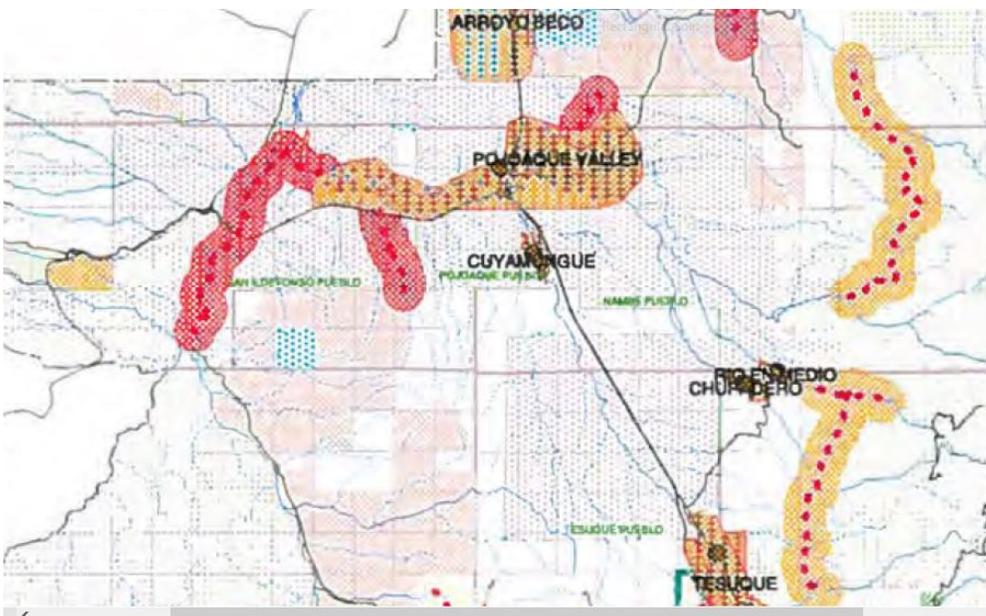
today’s trail users with a similar experience to that of historic trail users.”

The author hereby submits the November *Environmental Assessment* to BLM as part of the scoping process for the proposed Verde Line. All of the arguments that the *Assessment* makes for the Buckman segment – all of them are equally eloquent in opposing the Verde Line.

PART II

Question then is: What next for this the longest trail segment of El Camino Real? Does it end near Buckman or can we push it further north into what has been identified as the “major block of land” between Santa Fe and Espanola. (*El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement (National Park Service, 2004)*).

In 2000, Santa Fe County published its *Open Land and Trails Plan* with the goal: “to preserve historical trails and protect access to existing trails, trailheads and recreation opportunities on federal lands.”



They -- or we, actually -- planned a trail along the Rio Grande from San Ildefonso Pueblo south to connect with trails that link to Old Buckman Road. This trail would be a primary trail, segment 1: the top priority in the 2000 plan.

A trail was also planned to come south from the Pojoaque Valley through the Jacona Land Grant, but it stopped well short of Buckman Road.

From *Open Land and Trails Plan, 2000*

In 2010, Santa Fe County looked again at this question in its *Sustainable Growth Management Plan* or *SGMP*. Again to quote from the recent *Environmental Assessment*, the *Sustainable Growth Management Plan* states that:

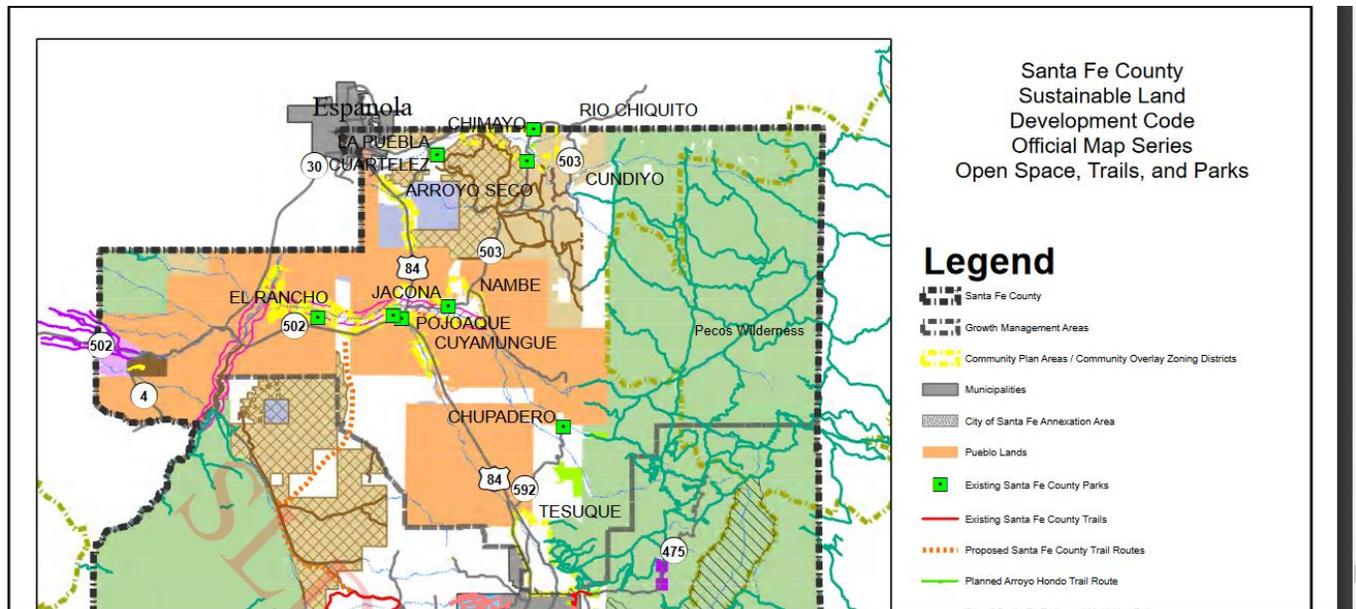
“an expanded and well-maintained trail network would provide a green alternative to motorized transportation and improve the quality of life in the community and attract tourists who are looking for outdoor recreational opportunities.”

By 2010 the trail along the Rio Grande was not happening and would not happen anytime soon. So, the *SGMP* kept the proposed Rio Grande trail in the plan, but also lengthened the planned trail coming through the Jacona Land Grant to reach south to Old Buckman Road. (This map is not shown.) The trail has to go this way –the Jacona Land Grant is the only gap in the Pueblo trust land that allows the trail to connect the privately-owned land in the Pojoaque Valley with the BLM and private lands to the south.

Please note however that the planned trail is an approximation – we don't know exactly where it would go except through the Jacona Land Grant.

In late 2015, about a year ago, it fell to a subcommittee of Santa Fe County's Open Lands, Trails, and Parks Advisory Committee (COLTPAC) to reexamine the County's planned network of trails and propose any necessary revisions as part of the adoption the County's *Sustainable Land Development Code (SLDC)*.

The author chaired that subcommittee and at that time we were thinking explicitly about El Camino Real. We kept the planned trail along the Rio Grande. The state of New Mexico had endorsed and begun to implement a state-wide Rio Grande trail with bi-partisan support. (See: <http://www.lcsun-news.com/story/news/local/las-cruces/2016/10/20/la-llorona-becomes-latest-segment-rio-grande-trail/92482970/>) The local Rio Grande trail will happen someday. But realistically the next segment of an El Camino Real trail is more likely to come through the Jacona Land Grant as indicated by the dotted red line on the map below.



From SLDC. Map 5, Official Map Series

This trail would allow the approximately 8,000 people of the Pojoaque Valley to access the same historical, recreational, and scenic resources of the same federal lands accessed by the Buckman Road segment. In theory, we can reach these areas now: El Rancho, for instance, is quite close to Otowi Peak. In practice, however, it is a long circuitous trip. From the El Rancho Community Center to the Norton Substation on Old Buckman Road is a 45-minute drive.

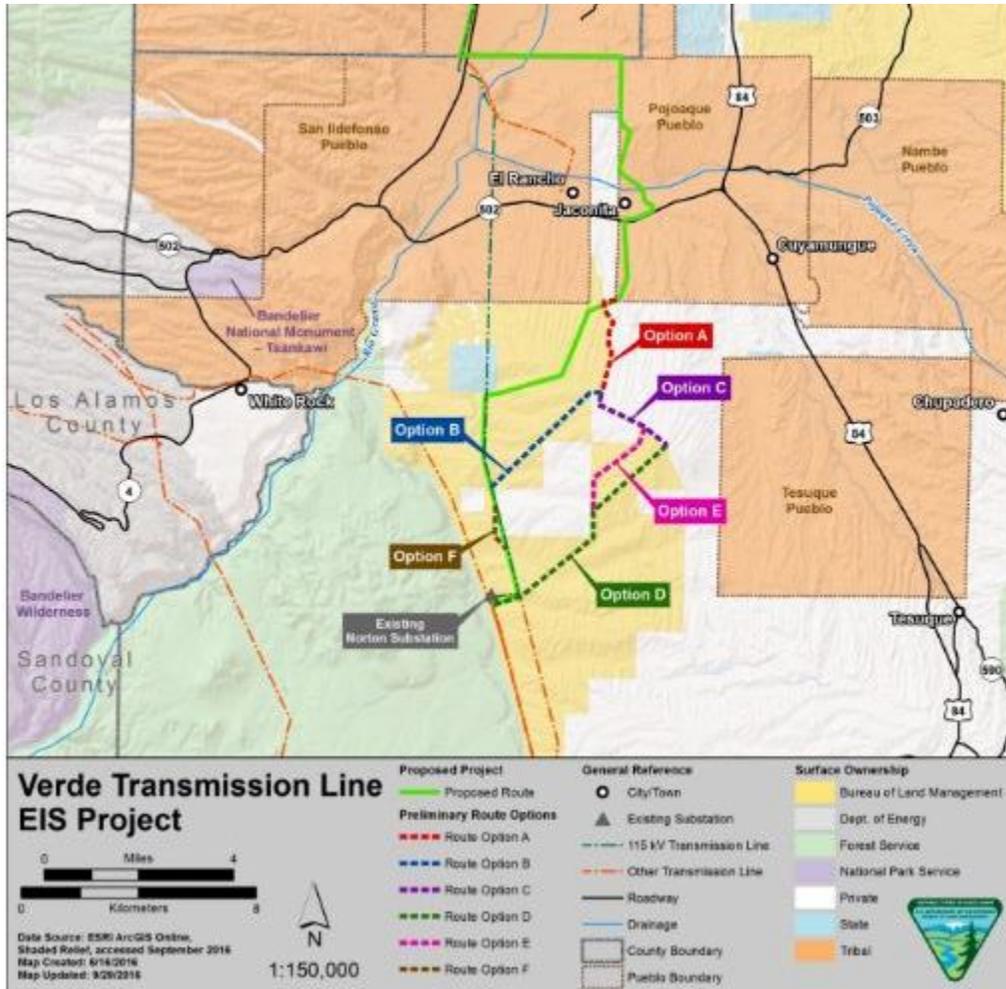
This proposed trail would also be best way for anyone coming from the north to access the opportunities of the federal lands – coming from Los Alamos, Espanola, Taos, Colorado, etc.

The planned trails map was adopted as Map 5 of the Official Map Series of the SLDC in December 2015 and remains the official trails map today. If a private landowner were to develop part of this land, that developer would be required to set aside land for this trail. If, however, Hunt builds a power line across BLM land, they are required to do absolutely nothing for the trail – instead they will ruin the view.

Part III

Problem: this unique area, this priceless resource is already something of a utility corridor. The map below is snipped from a BLM map. Two existing power lines come up along the Old Buckman Road segment of El Camino Real to the Norton substation. A third existing power line parallels them slightly

to the east. The Norton substation is quite large – the author would estimate four acres -- and sits quite close to Old Buckman Road. From the Norton substation, one existing line continues north-northwest along Old Buckman Road. Another existing power line initially parallels it, but then turns due north to cross the Pojoaque Valley and partially wrap around Black Mesa before crossing the Rio Grande.



Conclusion

So, we have come to a crossroads.

Do we say that the largest trail section of El Camino Real, and the largest block of land between Santa Fe and Espanola, are already junked up, so let us allow Texas oil billionaires to junk them up more? Will we expand that substation – will we put another three acres of industrial steel as high as 130 feet right next to that trail?

And we won't bring the power line in from the rear. It will come around the side with a radical change in direction and then to a halt right on El Camino Real. At least two massive towers would perch right on El Camino Real.

And we'll put in a brand-new power line across previously unspoiled territory, debasing the view from Santa Fe County's planned trail that enters the Pojoaque Valley through the Jacona Land Grant. The power line as drawn is an approximation and shows alternative paths. Nonetheless, it follows approximately the same route as does Santa Fe County's planned trail.

And while we are at it, we'll send this high voltage power line past schools, and close by homes, and before the previously unspoiled north side of Black Mesa. It is amazing how much destruction we can wreak with just one 33-mile power line – how much of our history, our culture, our health, our economic well-being, and our God-given scenery can be despoiled.

And let's be frank. If one more power line is approved, what will stop the next power line, and the next?

But we can take the other direction at the crossroads.

We can say, NO, it is time to stop the Verde high voltage power line and protect these priceless, historic, irreplaceable resources against further desecration. AND some of the existing lines seem like they are getting old. They sag, they sag a lot, and they hum. So perhaps it's time to do more than just put a stop to the Verde line. As these existing power lines age, it is time to take them out – to restore our unique resource to an unspoiled state and create a world class resource right here in Santa Fe.

These trails represent our past, but also the future that we want for Santa Fe County. We are not looking for cloud storage centers or for the revival of manufacturing. We want outdoor recreation, tourism, movie making, and art. We are a post-industrial community: we neither need nor want a lot of electricity. We do need and want our environment, our scenery, our culture, our history. For this, we need these trails in their unspoiled state.