



Free Roaming Horses of Placitas

Sandoval County, State of New Mexico

CY19 Activities Report

INTRODUCTION:

The unincorporated area of Placitas contained within Sandoval County, New Mexico, has struggled with the challenge of finding humane, sustainable solutions for its free roaming horses for some time. This issue has also grown on pace with the (human) population growth in Placitas, which has spiked considerably in recent years to now appx 7,000 residents. Access to homes in the area is achieved off of the one main artery road, Highway 165, to branch roads in relatively remote neighborhoods. In addition to public safety and environmental impact concerns, the high-dry desert terrain cannot sustain the 140+ free roaming horses which has lead to many residents treating them as pets. They name them, they feed them (including near roadways), and some even groom them. There are also private property rights that demand consideration and pose certain complexities.



In 2008, considerable State efforts were made to develop a Wild Horse State Park as a positive solution to address this issue within Placitas and throughout New Mexico. Feasibility studies were conducted by The State and plans were made to purchase appx 11,000 acres in the Cerrillos area of Santa Fe County but regrettably this did not come to fruition. (Please see NM Senate Memorial 35 from the 2008 Session introduced by then State Senator Komadina).

And while this issue has created deeply polarized divides, most opposing interested parties agree on one essential needed action: A legislative remedy is required to correct the well-intended-but-problematic current State statute (NMSA 77-18-5) that mandates certain dispositional requirements for these horses that are either not feasible or simply unenforceable. Multiple efforts to rectify this dilemma through the legislative process by multiple parties have been introduced over the years, but nothing has passed.

CURRENT EFFORTS AND ACTIVITIES:

Sandoval County has taken several recent measures to attempt to address the issue. The County has worked with the Department of Transportation on horse signage, it has significantly increased speed patrols, administered community surveys, hosted or provided public education sessions by Subject Matter Experts, developed and maintains a resource-rich website dedicated exclusively to this issue (<https://www.sandovalcountynm.gov/placitas-horses/>), engaged in a

variety of meetings with related entities to explore viable humane sustainable solutions in full compliance with current laws, among other efforts. And although it did not pass, the County remains grateful to State Senator Stephanics for (re)introducing the same concept of a Wild Horse State Park under Senate Memorial 26 during the 2019 Legislative Session.

In addition, following a public solicitation process the County also contracted with nationally recognized Subject Matter Expert and local vendor, Mount Taylor Mustangs, to (1) conduct a population survey; (2) administer a fertility control program; and (3) develop a working draft of a herd management plan addressing the presently disproportionate number of horses for the land to sustain.

As well, the County also established a multidisciplinary Advisory Council consisting of both government and citizen members. Specifically, one (1) member is a representative from the Federal Bureau of Land Management; one (1) member is a representative from the New Mexico

Livestock Board; one (1) member is the Sandoval County Commissioner for District One or Designee; one (1) member is a representative from the Sandoval County Sheriff's Office; one (1) member is a representative from the Sandoval County Community Services Department; and the remaining four (4) members are Commission-selected citizens based upon relevant credentials and/or subject matter expertise.



The table below represents current membership of the Council:

Members/Reps	Term Ends	Position
Katherine A. Bruch	12/31/2022	D1 Commissioner
Anne Ryan	N/A	Community Services Director
Allen Mills	N/A	SCSO Captain
Dr. Ralph Zimmerman	N/A	State Veterinarian, New Mexico Livestock Board
Angel Martinez	N/A	Federal Bureau of Land Management
Paul Fish	12/31/2020	Citizen Member Appointed by (former) D1 Commissioner Holden-Rhodes at the 12/13/2018 Commission Meeting
Peggy Roberts	12/31/2020	Citizen Member Appointed by D5 Commissioner Eichwald at the 12/13/2018 Commission Meeting
Jessica Johnson	12/31/2020	Citizen Member Appointed by D5 Commissioner Eichwald at the 12/13/2018 Commission Meeting
Dr. Ross LeClaire	12/31/2020	Citizen Member Appointed by D2 Commissioner Block at the 09/05/2019 Commission Meeting (replacing Ania Klas)

The mission of the Council is to develop, oversee, and recommend legal, long-term, humane, sustainable solutions for the Free Roaming Horses in the Placitas area that effectively address the issue to the extent possible. These solutions may be multifaceted in nature and occur over time commensurate with available resources and in full compliance with relevant legal provisions.

The Council is required to publish an annual activities report. This document serves to meet that requirement for the 2019 calendar year (CY19).

The Council includes ad hoc subcommittees which consist of up to five people with skillsets tied to current tasks at the discretion of designated lead. Members may change over time commensurate with needs or activities. Committees meet between full formal Council meetings and are informal in nature and can meet according to Committee preferences. Subcommittees report back to full Council regarding devised recommendations for Council votes where applicable.

In addition to the Advisory Council's Planning Committee, representing the administrative arm of the Council, there are two primary subcommittees. One is the Public Safety/Public Awareness Subcommittee that is frequently referred to as the "Short Term Subcommittee" and serves to develop greater public safety measures while providing public awareness on such activities as they work to create a cooperative climate within the community. They are short-term planners focused on feasible, immediate, interim measures that mitigate risk.

The other is the Preservation/Protection and Resource Development Subcommittee and is frequently referred to as the "Long Term Subcommittee" as it serves to develop resources that are focused on the larger vision supported by a sustainable structure with activities that may include items such as the acquisition of land, identification of labor and financial resources, development of volunteer recruitment and management, and Equi/Ecotourism opportunities.

During CY19 the Advisory Council's quarterly meetings occurred on:

- Wednesday, Jan. 9 – 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.
- Wednesday, April 10 – 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.
- Wednesday, July 10 – 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.
- Wednesday, Oct. 9 – 9:30 a.m. to 12 p.m.

And throughout this time some Agenda highlights from the Council included:

- Review of current State Statute and jurisdictional provisions related to this issue along with the applicability of the Federal Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 on the Placitas herds (a point deserving of frequent clarification for many).
- Review of the NMSU symposium dedicated exclusively to this issue (statewide).
- Presentation by Subject Matter Expert and local resident Dr. Anne Hale about a continuum-based series of full-spectrum Rules of Engagement considerations as we move towards the need to formalize certain standards.
- Discussion of prospective Ordinance changes as a starting point on a far wider conversation.
- Presentation by Bureau of Land Management Range Specialists on the science behind their formula of horse:range ratios to ensure healthy rangeland.
- Subcommittee updates at every meeting to apprise the Council and the community on work that included activities such as school seminars, development and distribution of educational brochures, significantly increased speed controls, hosting meetings with community members and local organizations, ongoing research of resources, and formalizing a focus on establishing by-agreement Rules of Engagement, among other efforts.
- Mount Taylor Mustangs presentations at every meeting to apprise the Council and community on fertility control project status and as our Subject Matter Expert consultant.

For full details on the Council, including but not limited to its Resolution and Bylaws, meetings, handouts, and related, the reader is strongly encouraged to explore the noted County webpage(s).

CONCLUSION:

A State legislative remedy remains necessary to more clearly define legal status of equines, (re)affirm or revise current legal authority, and ensure that the associated dispositional regulations are realistic and enforceable. Despite many efforts to achieve this over the years, there does appear to be a groundswell of bipartisan political will that could gain greater traction on this issue during the 2021 State Session.



In the interim, Sandoval County will continue to explore viable options for a Wild Horse Park – potentially in multiple areas -- in collaboration with relevant public and private entities and leveraging of relevant resources. While the hope is that the State will take the lead on this initiative in tandem with the scope of its jurisdiction, if that does not occur the County Commission must decide upon the level of resources it is willing to commit towards such an endeavor – quite likely through the administration of a phased-in approach based upon available resources that would ideally grow over time.

And in addition to the current efforts of the Advisory Council, it will continue to engage with the County and community while supporting solution-based strategies that are commensurate with healthy horses: healthy range ratios coupled with clearly established and enforced Rules of Engagement for the community. Once such collective efforts feasibly align, the role of the Council will likely dissolve into a “Friends of” opportunity that would allow for community-wide participation with the County potentially serving as fiscal agent so that participants have full access to and assurances of appropriately applied resources.
