A NEW ERA FOR RAILYARD

Take a stroll through city’s newest park

TRAINS KEEP ROLLING ALONG

A celebration for the whole town

RAILYARD

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Government and Santa Fe Railyard officials break ground for the underground parking garage during a ceremony near El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe.

Dear friends and neighbors,

It is a great honor for me to welcome you to our new Santa Fe Railyard. Back in 1995, residents banded together in an unparalleled way to preserve this common ground as a gathering place for our community. Today we see the collective vision for this space become a reality.

The Railyard is our community's shared accomplishment. Its revitalization is the result of a vibrant public-private partnership between the City of Santa Fe, The Trust for Public Land, the Santa Fe Railyard Community Corporation, valued on-site nonprofit entities, and countless public and private supporters which have invested thousands of hours and an estimated $125 million in the project.

On Sept. 13 and 14, I invite you to come celebrate this new public realm. This is your Railyard, and it couldn't have been done without you!

Sincerely,

David Coss
Mayor
A dream realized
Years of debate, discussion, and now — a Railyard reborn

BY JULIE ANN GRIMM

Just a few blocks west of the Plaza's ever-gentrifying historic core, Santa Fe’s adobe face starts to look less uniform. Here, the landscape of museums and galleries begins to give way to homes.

It's in this borderland that railroad tracks cut a line north and south and along their steel rails that a unique character developed: wide vacant spaces, corrugated metal buildings and other structures built from rail cars, industrial and artistic uses as well as informal shelter for the homeless. It came to be known as the Railyard.

This summer, more than 50 acres of tracks and land are experiencing rebirth. Through the vision of residents and the persistence of developers, a blighted territory is being transformed.

Now a once-rutted dirt lot is a walkway lined with new buildings that offer art and commerce, a park and playground and more.

"It really is a dream come true. This has been in the dreaming (stage) for so many years," said Amelia Hollis Romero, who recently strolled through the project with her husband, Bernabe Romero. Both are lifetime city residents who have long participated in the planning at the Railyard.

"It's basically a revitalization of a supreme nature that took place," Bernabe Romero said. "And it was all because of hardworking people and tenacity on their part."

The Santa Fe Railyard came into being only because of dramatic public investment that city residents spearheaded more than 100 years ago.

When the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe bypassed the city, residents organized a bond election to pay the company $150,000 for the spur connecting Santa Fe to the iron horse.

In the ensuing years, the Railyard was home to food warehouses with freight docks that backed up to the train, lumber yards and other industry — a gateway for shipping and receiving.

But as the interstate highway system shifted the load from trains, the Railyard story changed. In the last part of the 20th century, as the railway struggled, numerous interested parties sought the best option to profit from its Santa Fe spur and the land around it.

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe had allowed tenants to set up businesses there — an affordable endeavor compared to the pricey spaces available in more gentrified or historically recognized areas of the city.

Then, the railway's Batellus Development Corporation prepared redevelopment plans for the land that would have altered Santa Fe's landscape, adding towering multi-story office buildings and removing most of the other buildings on the site.

The plan was so incongruous with community ideas and existing features that city leaders soundly rejected it in 1992.

At the same time, the Trust for Public Land was eyeing the area and attempting to broker a deal that would secure the land for public use and cut the company a tax break. In 1995, under the leadership of then-Mayor Debbie Jaramillo, the City Council partnered with the trust to buy the Railyard for about $31 million.

Jaramillo even lectured at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard about the project. She was invited there to explain the Santa Fe community dream to the mayors of big cities like Anchorage and Cincinnati.

"I'm over there thinking, I could turn back. I could not feel so intimidated right now. It's hard to intimidate me, but I was intimidated," she said, recalling her trip to the Ivy League school. "But I got up there and I told him that we, the city of Santa Fe, had purchased this ... and this is how we were going to do it, the community was going to plan it."

Looking back now, Jaramillo said she feels good that she's recognized as a
leader in the effort and she is pleased that the Railyard and its 10-acre park is a place the community can enjoy. A street there is named after her, Alcaldeas Way, honoring her legacy as the city’s first and, to date, only female mayor.

“I asked myself, what if we had not tied it down like we did? What could possibly be there? Would we have more of these monstrous buildings? It is certainly better than what could have been,” she said.

Mired in bureaucracy, the city and its active residents embarked on years of activity including community meetings, design workshops and public debates that would shape the future of the Railyard — striking a hard-fought balance between amenities for the community and commercial development to pay the bills.

“I think if you compare what Catellus proposed and what has been developed under the community plan, that in itself is a success,” said City Councilor Miguel Chavez, who lives near the Railyard and participated in the redesign before taking office.

Dirt started flying with a groundbreaking 11 years later in 2006, and this summer new buildings are open, a park is being completed and much of the area is leased for development.

The city collaborated with the American Institute of Architects, the Trust for Public Land, and a grassroots nonprofit called the Land Use Resource Center to develop a plan for the area based on community desires.

An 18-month process began in 1996 and involved about 6,000 city residents with a public consensus that aimed to keep the railroad running to the historic depot, build a park and create opportunities for local business in an arts and cultural district.

The City Council approved a master plan in late 1997, the same year officials instituted a gross-receipts tax to pay 70 percent of the debt from the land purchase.

After a failed city approach to organize redevelopment, officials made an agreement with a group that had been envisioned in the community planning process — a newly formed nonprofit whose board of directors included those who had worked on the master plan and others who had finance and development experience in the community.

That group, Santa Fe Railyard Community Corporation, agreed in 2002 to implement the plan through a lease and management agreement. The nonprofit took out a loan to build streets and infrastructure and agreed to write down 30 percent of the city’s land-purchase cost, then share any future profits from development with the city.

The master plan called for a mix of uses on the land that would preserve its character while allowing space for business and perpetual use by nonprofits. To accomplish that goal, the community corporation then subdivided 22 parcels of land in the 7-acre area slated for development. Just more than half are local businesses.

Major sports retailer REI is the largest tenant of a retail complex that is perched atop a 400-space parking garage funded by the city. Another 20 percent of the developed area will be occupied by locally based nonprofits, including a farmers market and teen center.

Architect Steven Robinson, president of the community corporation’s board of directors, said the pro formas of the project was not universally popular but survived because of its vision.

“If your primary interest is what the real-estate industry calls highest and best use, you are required to get the highest return on your investment as soon as possible. That’s not our goal,” Robinson said. “Our goal is to create a community asset. What it says is that we are a community which cares enough about its people to take a long-term view. The financial returns will take time, but they will be there.”

Data on today’s financial picture confirms that idea. The city is scheduled to make its final payment on the purchase debt in 2010, and the private sector has development approval for about $60 million worth of buildings, the construction of which already has generated nearly $6 million in gross-receipts taxes.

Residents will get to break in the Railyard this weekend, during which time they will no doubt make personal judgments about success.

For Bob Sarr, longtime Santa Fe Southern Railway man, there are still juxtapositions to consider.

“In some ways, I think the penny loafers won,” he said. “They are getting more uptight about having everything sparkling and neat and clean, even though people want it to be gritty. But it is still going to be good.

“I think it unequivocally, absolutely is a benefit to our community, and it’s absolutely the right way to do this kind of project, with people with different perspectives and different objectives.”
Growing a park

Unique public space welcomes everyone

"A vibrant, beautiful, popular and safe community gathering place representing the history, values and aspirations of the people of Santa Fe," vision of the Railyard Stewards

BY ARIN MCKENNA

Picture yourself walking under a shady ramada covered with the dark green foliage and orange flowers of trumpet vines. Or you’re enjoying the scent and brilliant hues of shrub roses while resting on a park swing shaded with silver lace vine. Or strolling alongside a 400-year-old acequia under 20- to 30-foot-tall cottonwood trees filled with birdsong. Or delighting in fluid drifts of texture and color in a xeric-landscaped version of an English border garden.

Picture each pleasure when you visit the new Railyard Park and Plaza, whose present persona is almost a Zen version of what it will become. The shade, greenery and color described above is 10 years in the future.

Right now, those vines are knee-high. The xeric gardens are small plantings nestled in a river of ochre-colored gravel. Siberian elms, remnants of the park’s earlier incarnation, continue to provide shade until cottonwoods, oaks, crabapples and other trees are large enough to take over.

But even in its infancy, Santa Fe’s newest park vibrates with life.

“There’s enough of a bone structure that it will look good on Day One,” said Ken Smith, landscape architect and head of the park’s design team. He and his team — artist Mary Miss and architect Frederic Schwartz won a 2001 competition to create the park.

The “bone structure” of the Railyard Park and Plaza had to adhere to strict guidelines. The goal was to create a space where Santa Feans of all ages, economic classes, neighborhoods and cultures could interact with one another, with places to sit as well as foot trails and bikeways accessible to people of all physical abilities.

The design had to be suitable for community gatherings, public art and cultural events while honoring the historical aspects of the area. The result is a remarkably diverse space, with areas for people watching and picnicking, quiet reflection or fiestas.

“My goal was to bring together the different histories of the area while making a real, viable space for people who live in Santa Fe today," Smith said.

The park is expected to evolve over time to address needs that have been overlooked. "There’s always something you might forget, but that’s the good thing about this park,” said Sue Sturtevant, chairwoman of the Railyard Stewards. "It will continue to grow, continue to change, and as time goes on, as new things have been overlooked by all the people involved can be corrected, can be added, can be enhanced later. It’s a growing entity. It’s going to keep evolving and getting better and better.”

Stewardship committee member Ellyn Feldman is itching to install a pole with a hook so piñatas can be hung for birthday parties.

Sustainability was a crucial element of the design. "The idea was to capture as much water as possible through both large- and small-scale permaculture (cultivated ecosystems structured after natural ecosystems) to keep the water on site," Smith said. To that end, the uplying areas of the park are slightly elevated and contoured to channel rainfall toward low-lying areas within the park.

An extensive rain-capturing system, developed in cooperation with the city of Santa Fe and Railyard businesses, should provide about 40 percent of the irrigation water needed. Businesses such as the Railyard galleries and the Santa Fe Farmers Market designed their buildings to capture and direct rainwater into storage tanks with 110,000-gallon storage capacity.

Drainage channels on the plaza also help capture rainfall. Harvested water will be augmented by municipal water, especially during the first two years when plants are being established. The irrigation system is set up in zones so the watering needs of each area can be met without wasting water. Computerized monitors showing how much water comes into the system and how much is used will be part of educational exhibits for park visitors.

They may not be providing shade yet, but more than 400 trees have been
planted, along with several thousand plants. Plants such as roses and irises, which have become part of Santa Fe’s culture, were used sparingly. Because grass requires large amounts of water, it has been confined to a grassy slope for audiences in the performance area and a few picnic circles.

“There’s a lot of emphasis on rambling plants that are tough,” said Molly Methaffy, a member of the Railyard Advisory Committee and the Railyard Stewards who was instrumental in choosing plants.

Methaffy said Smith’s design brings a new concept to the city’s parks.

“I guess you could say that the ideas are not particularly new to gardeners in New Mexico, but they just haven’t been used in parks,” Methaffy said. “Parks have a tendency to just be either lawn and trees or strictly formal gardens, not this blend of using native plants together with hardy plants from other parts of the world, which is very common in residential gardening in New Mexico.”

Methaffy noted another innovative design concept. “It’s relatively new in park design to have so much people-oriented horticulture, to have real gardens to sit in. You take someplace like Central Park — there are only a few gardens within the gigantic park that do that. Even though this park is big, it’s really more like an ornamental garden than it is like a gigantic open park.”

The park comprises 10 of the 13 acres of open space in the Railyard complex. The remaining three acres, in the commercial district of the Railyard, include the Alameda (a walking mall with stalls for the farmers market) walking/biking trails and two pocket parks.

The pocket parks also need time to grow into what Smith calls “little pockets of comfort,” with tree-shaded benches and picnic tables.

Social activities will evolve as the park matures, although opening-weekend activities should set the tone. Park supporters envision a humming with everything from natural events to family gatherings.

“If the Plaza is Santa Fe’s living room, the Railyard Park will be the family room: less formal, more casual, where people can come together and enjoy daily life,” Smith said.

Brian Drypolcher, director of the Railyard Park and Plaza project for the Trust for Public Land, expressed the dream of everyone involved in the project. “We just hope that over time, more and more people come to know the space, more and more people come to love the space, and more and more people use it, and it just really becomes more and more vital over time as people realize what a great resource it is in terms of a social space and a green space.”

Raising money

The Trust for Public Land has raised nearly $12.9 million dollars of the $13.5 million needed to complete the park.

The group is seeking contributions to complete the project. For more information, contact the Trust for Public Land, attention Laurel Savino, director of development, at 505-988-5982, Ext. 114, 1600 Lena St., Suite C, Santa Fe, NM 87505-3891, or e-mail laurel.savino@tp.org.

Learn more by visiting www.railyardpark.org.