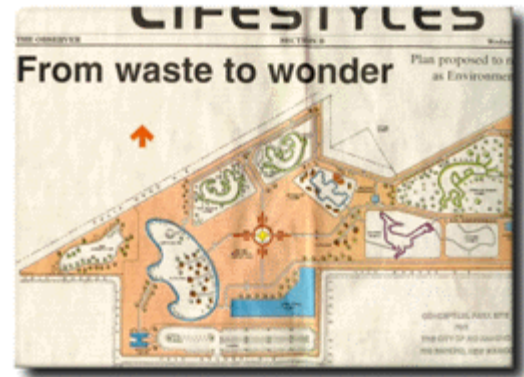


## Taken from the Rio Rancho Observer on March 12 1997

It's the epitome of recycling-an ambitious plan to take what was once 60 acres of landfill and reclaim it, recycling it into a recreational and education center to serve the public.

Such plans have been drawn and enthusiastically accepted by the City Council-to reclaim the Rio Rancho Sanitary Landfill. Once the existing landfill site is closed, the city hopes to transform it into a 60-acre educational and recreational "living desert" attraction.

Funding for the multi-million- dollar project, however, will need to be obtained.



Officials from the city and Waste Management of New Mexico, which operates the landfill, recently unveiled their reclamation plans for the dump site.

Many years ago - before there was a landfill or even Rio Rancho - the landfill site along Northern Boulevard was a Chichilan Desert. Creating such a desert once again would be somewhat simple and attractive to residents and tourists, according to [Butch DeFillippo](#) of the city Parks and Recreation Department. By augmenting the living desert with such amenities as an amphitheater, recycling center and art garden, the proposed "Rio Rancho Environmental Education Park" will be the first of its kind in New Mexico and, perhaps, the country.

"This park will on New Mexico's historical development, its cultural diversity, and present-day environmental challenges," a concept report states. "The park will lead our visitors full circle though a journey of life in New Mexico."

If and when built, the environmental park would be situated at one of the highest points in Rio Rancho. "The views from there are great," DeFillippo said.

Once completed, the park will encompass nearly 60 acres and include various gardens, an education center, pavilions, a xeroscape exhibit, a petroglyph exhibit, art exhibits, and working demonstrations in recycling and composting.

Each of the exhibits will be laid out to accommodate walking tours of the site. But perhaps the best view of the park would be from above. The walkways - designed in New Mexicoesque shapes of a roadrunner, kokopelli, a bear, geckos, and the like - will each be paved in different color gravel. The images will be apparent from hot air balloons and airliners overhead.

The design work was drawn by Cinfran Engineering, a local company which has four people on the landfill reclamation design team. "Once we got going on the design...the hardest part was putting the

walkways into shapes," said Cinfran's Larry Gonzales.

Once completed, DeFillippo believes the environmental park will undoubtedly become something to experience. "People will see a beautiful park, not a landfill," he said. "Our hope is that it will become a tourist attraction" for out-of-towners and local residents alike. And, since the exhibits will be changed periodically, the park will attract visitors again and again, he said.

The educational aspects of the park, DeFillippo explained, will benefit local residents - those new to the region wanting to learn about xeroscaping and composting, for instance - and students. "We hope to develop a partnership with the school system," he said.

"I'm very excited about this. It's something I never envisioned," said Marlene Feuer, Waste Management general manager. "This is a wonderful use if a former landfill."

Waste Management currently operates 195 landfills across the country. While many of the company's landfills have closed, and have been reclaimed for various uses Feuer said Rio Rancho's landfill would be the first to be transformed into an environmental education park.

Feuer, who served on the reclamation design team, said, "I didn't want this (landfill) to close, just to become a mound of dirt." What the team has envisioned, she said, is an economic development project which should draw attention to Rio Rancho.

Developing the 60 acres, however will not come cheap. About \$5 million will be needed to complete the project, DeFillippo estimates. Depending on the extent of landscaping and the other amenities, he said the cost estimates could change.

To obtain funds for the project, the city will look into state and federal grants and make appeals for corporate and private donations. "Waste Management has already committed to participate," DeFillippo said.

Indeed, Feuer said Waste Management has already spent about \$5,000 to have the design plans drawn up. In partnership with the city, she said the company would likely operate the park's recycling center and possibly sponsor one of the exhibits. "We hope to be a player in this project," Feuer said.

The environmental park, DeFillippo said, may also generate some revenue for the city. Admission fees to the park would probably be charged and some of the amenities will be available for rent for weddings, picnics and the like.

Since most of the 60-acre site is no longer being used for dumping trash, DeFillippo said the project could be built in phases, beginning now. Or, he said, the city may work to obtain funding for the project,

and begin building the entire park two years from now when the entire 60 acres will be available.

The existing Rio Rancho Sanitary Landfill has about two years of life remaining, according to Feuer. To continue operating the facility, Waste Management has purchased an additional 50 acres of land to the north of the existing landfill. The additional acreage should give the company another 10 years of landfill space.

Landfills, Feuer explained, are one of the most regulated industries in the nation. The proper closing of a landfill, therefore, is dictated by stringent state and federal regulations. Once a landfill is closed, Waste Management would be responsible for monitoring the site for erosion, gas and groundwater leaks for a period of 30 years - even if a project such as the environmental park is built atop it.

Waste Management's agreement with the City of Rio Rancho stipulates that ownership of the closed landfill site will be transferred to the city... but only if the city requests the transfer. If not, the abandoned landfill would remain Waste Management's property.

According to DeFillippo, the landfill reclamation options are somewhat limited. Because of potential erosion and land shifts, the building of large structures is not recommended atop abandoned landfills. Also, because of the possibility of groundwater contamination, the eventual use should not require too much water. Although golf courses or soccer fields have been built atop closed landfills, DeFillippo said the annual maintenance costs of such projects are quite expensive.

When the reclamation plans were presented, the City Council embraced the concept and suggested that funding options be sought. "It's worth while project to pursue," Councilor Gary Hill said. Councilor Joe Cordova said such a park would give people another reason to visit Rio Rancho.

What's the attraction?

**Environmental/Education Center:** A state-of-the-art facility, serving as the entrance to the park with interactive exhibits, 40-seat theater, administrative offices, restrooms and classrooms.

**Pavilions/Amphitheater:** These open air facilities may be used for picnicking and rental for parties. Special presentations, such as storytellers and guest speakers, may utilize the amphitheater.

**New Mexican Exhibit:** An exhibit illustrating the various deserts found in New Mexico, like scenes of New Mexico before cattleman invasion; the Chihuahuan desert found to the south of Socorro, the high desert, and the lower juniper and pinon region.

**Living Desert:** An exhibit of local natural wildlife found in Central New Mexico. Birds and small animals are suggested in low impact structures that accent their natural habitat.

**Petroglyph Park:** Will exhibit artifacts native to Rio Rancho. Petroglyphs will line the walkways and artifacts will be explained through interpretive signs. This location may host interactive speakers illustrating the grinding of maize or the weaving of blankets.

**Historic Geographical Site:** This found at the pinnacle of the park. From this location, the Jemez, Santa Fe, Mount Taylor, Los Lunas, and Socorro peaks can be located and clearly seen on clear days. This exhibit will be an elevated octagon filled with interpretive signs telling of the geography of central New Mexico.

**Xeroscape Desert:** A truly unique xeroscape park to illustrate how parks, yards and rights-of-way can look beautiful when xeroscaped. This area will be equipped with mini-patios and gazebos which could be rented for weddings and family gatherings.

**Xeroscape Garden:** Adjacent to the xeroscape Desert with interpretive signs describing the plants found in the park, their watering and pruning needs, and estimated lifespan. This garden's intent is to educate the public on how they can have an attractive xeroscaped landscape.

**Recycling Center:** This will be an operational recycling center to handle all recyclable collected by the citizens of Rio Rancho. There will also be an enclosed walkway through which patrons can view the daily process of sorting, bailing, and shipping.

**Composting:** This site will exemplify the concept of backyard composting. Strictly an educational facility and not a commercial composting site, the site will educate citizens on composting correctly at home.

**Changing Exhibits:** This site will allow for new rotating exhibits to be highlighted at the park. These exhibits will encourage patrons to return to the park regularly.

**Art Exhibits:** These exhibits will be funded throughout the park and will be constructed of recycled materials.

**Living World:** This exhibit will be an interactive world, where patrons will experience native New Mexican wildlife. There will be a free flight zone for butterflies, birds, and insects. Warm-water fish will also swim through ponds surrounded by native plants.

**Landfilling:** With the landfill expansion occurring to the north, all phases of the expansion will be viewed by park patrons. This is an incredible opportunity for visitors to witness what is necessary for proper waste management.