

Paseo del Norte and Petroglyph National Monument: A Request for Help

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On September 26, 2004, the executive committee of the New Mexico Archeological Council voted to sponsor a large (16 inch tall, 5 column wide) ad in the *Albuquerque Journal* on October 31, 2004, opposing the Albuquerque street bond question that will go before voters on November 2. The street bond includes \$8.7 million for extending Paseo del Norte through Petroglyph National Monument. We now turn to archaeological and historic preservation organizations at the local, New Mexico, and national level to endorse the ad, and to help with the cost if possible. We also seek individual donations. If the match by other groups and individuals exceeds 50 percent of the \$5,324 cost, NMAC will use the difference to increase the size of the ad.

The controversy about Paseo del Norte has existed since Petroglyph National Monument was created in 1990. Some of the original backers of the national monument claim that when it was created, they had a handshake deal to allow Paseo del Norte (and other infrastructure) to pass through the monument. It was, nonetheless, a private handshake deal, and since then many groups (including the National Park Service) that were not in on the deal have refused to ratify it. Instead they have worked to protect the monument and its cultural resources from unnecessary and damaging encroachments.

The long-term goal for Paseo del Norte is an east-west freeway extending across Albuquerque. The city has repeatedly claimed that the extension through Petroglyph National Monument will relieve current and projected traffic congestion on Albuquerque's west side. However, analysis of data in the city's 1992 Environmental Impact Statement for the project showed a clear alternative to the Paseo extension, namely to route local traffic along a different road, Unser Boulevard. This alternative was found acceptable by the National Park Service and the N.M. State Historic Preservation Officer. In 2004, a new traffic study by the regional council of governments confirmed that Paseo is an ineffective solution to Albuquerque's traffic needs, either now or for the foreseeable future, while that the Unser Boulevard alternative is an



Circular mask image (representing, in turn, ancestral spirits) and a possible turtle. These two images are in the projected eastbound lane and cannot be avoided under any design. (Courtesy David Phillips)

effective solution to those needs. Nonetheless, Albuquerque’s mayor and a one-vote majority on the city council continue to champion the Paseo extension. At this point it’s clear that the primary motivation for Paseo is to benefit a handful of developers whose lands are otherwise outside the city’s predictable area of growth.

If the road is built, it will destroy prehistoric petroglyphs; the exact number will depend on the final design of the road. The road will also have visual and noise impacts that extend beyond the physical footprint, and will thus interfere with peoples’ ability to use and appreciate Petroglyph National Monument. The road will also break the continuity of the northern cluster of petroglyphs in the national monument, and physically isolate the northernmost portion of the monument.



Three boulders with petroglyphs. The nearest image is a bird, while the farthest is a mask. The middle boulder includes multiple small petroglyphs including a possible bird track. (Courtesy of David Phillips)

Local Native American governments and advocacy groups oppose the road extension on the grounds that the area is sacred to them. While we’ve heard that argument many times, ethnographic studies by the National Park Service document that local Native American groups do have well-established, deep-seated beliefs regarding the petroglyph area. The New Mexico Archeological Council respects those beliefs and will cite them in its ad, but is more directly concerned with other issues. The road will have an adverse effect on a registered archaeological district. Construction of the road will violate New Mexico law protecting registered cultural properties. The members of NMAC mostly make their living through CRM and fully understand the triage involved in historic preservation; they are comfortable with the sacrifice of archaeological resources, *for good reason*. In this case the city is unable to demonstrate significant traffic relief in exchange for the lasting damage to the

petroglyph area and a national monument, NMAC feels that the threshold for sacrificing cultural resources has not been met.

While the city initially attempted to meet federal environmental and historic preservation standards in building Paseo, in order to qualify for federal road funds, in recent years it has decided to do whatever it can to avoid those safeguards. It is no longer seeking federal funds for the road, but instead proposes to pay for Paseo itself. In 2003, by a 5 to 4 majority, the city council voted to put the Paseo bond question before Albuquerque voters. By the same one-vote majority, the council refused to break out Paseo as a separate issue, to allow city residents to vote directly on the road—the fear was that voters would reject Paseo. Instead, the city created a “poison pill” package where the only way to reject Paseo was to reject all new city street projects for the coming year. When Albuquerque’s residents went to the polls, they soundly rejected the combined street bond issue rather than approve Paseo. It was the only city bond issue to fail that year, and the first street bond issue to fail since 1985.

This time, by the same 5-4 vote, the city council has again chosen the “poison pill” approach, where the only way to vote against Paseo is to vote against all new city street work. The rationale is that 2003 was an off-year for elections, allowing opponents to have a disproportionate effect. This year, supporters claim, the higher turnout of “mainstream” voters will lead to approval of the general street bond package, and therefore of the Paseo extension. NMAC’s ad is intended to help make sure that city voters are aware of, and will again reject, the attempt to hide Paseo in a larger bond question.

While the Paseo extension reflects the tangle of local politics, for archaeologists the underlying question is simple: can we stand by when we see that cultural resources will be destroyed by a government project, for no good public reason? NMAC has decided that it cannot. We are asking other organizations to endorse this stand, and to back us with funding where that is possible.