

Berry's Call to the River



Mayor Berry paddleboarding on the Rio Grande

A businessman and former state legislator, Albuquerque Mayor Richard J. Berry may seem an unlikely advocate for the Rio Grande. But with a new proposal in hand—and a personal commitment to make the river a part of his daily life—the Republican mayor is making waves.

As part of “ABQ the Plan,” Berry is championing a river corridor initiative he hopes will bring more people to the banks of the river. The plan does not address the river’s flows, but it may re-connect the public to the river and inspire new activists. Working on the project has sparked the mayor’s interest in the Rio Grande, and also in statewide water policy and history.

In May, *Environmental Flows Bulletin* sat down with Berry in his office. Below, you can read a few excerpts from the transcript of that interview.

RJB: ABQ the Plan is about this idea of making public sector investments that then drive private sector investments that help us coordinate and combine resources with other governmental agencies whether they’re county, state, or federal to leverage these resources that we have—dollars—into something that’s going to make us succeed. Something that’s going to make Albuquerque much more vibrant than we already are today. And part of that is the river. A big part of that is the Rio Grande.

When I first moved to Albuquerque, to New Mexico, in 1982, I was so excited that we had a river in the community, because I’m an outdoorsman. I consider myself a conservationist. I consider myself someone who wants to hand it off better than we found it. But I also like to use things. I like to hunt and fish. I like to be outside. I like to hike on trails. I like to be out and use the environment, use this great landscape that New Mexico has.

Over the years, I just kind of found myself in the position I think a lot of people in New Mexico find themselves, and in Albuquerque in particular, and that is: I wish I had the river more in my day-to-day life. And that can mean many, many things to many different people. That can mean more places to hike. It can simply mean more places to gather with friends and family. It can mean fishing. It can mean mountain biking. It can mean horseback riding. It can mean launching a kayak or paddleboard, and being able to have a place to launch it and have a place to take it out of the river. A place just to get something to eat. It can mean lots of different things.

That's why we're starting this conversation. That's why we commissioned this study (of the river corridor). The study is in front of the city council for approval. [Editor's Note: The city council approved the funding in June.]

It's a \$150,000 contract to have a planning group in our community—this is, Dekker Perich Sabatini. The idea is to go out to the community and to meet with other stakeholders, meet with the (Middle Rio Grande) Conservancy District, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Army Corps of Engineers, meet with neighbors, meet with people who currently use the river, meet with people who are either afraid to use the river or haven't been to the Rio Grande—and find out what we can do to craft a long-term plan of what the river could be.

We don't have to do it all at once, but let's just make some decisions on what we're comfortable with as a community and what we can do with the river.

I'm adamant about the idea that we need to have the wilderness areas of the bosque intact. But I'd like to use them more. So how can we do that? Can we put crusher fines, gravel-type trails through where you get better access? Can we put a boat ramp in and a boat take out? Can we go to the seven different intersections that already cross the river, all the way from Alameda to Rio Bravo? Part of the study is to go to these places that cross the river ... and then talk about 'are there places where we can put some civilization?' A place to rent a bicycle or to rent a kayak, or a place for someone to pick you up when you take out of the river and take you back to your car? Maybe get a cup of coffee or a sandwich? Those kinds of things.

One of the things that people immediately ask about is, 'Well, are you talking about a San Antonio River Walk?' and the answer is 'No, that's not what we're talking about.' I was at the San Antonio River Walk two days ago on another matter and had a chance to enjoy that great amenity for their city. But that's not what we're talking about. We're not talking about channelizing the river. We're talking about keeping it in its current state, but improving it.

I think it's so important in the long run. I think the best way to be great stewards of any natural resource is to fall in love with that natural resource. And if we can get more people in our community to fall in love with the Rio Grande—not just acknowledge that it's in our city, (but) use it more, it will be better cared for, it will be a healthier river decades ahead of now. We'll be better stewards of the Rio Grande if we can get more people to fall in love with it.

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RJB: When I went to Washington, DC several weeks ago, I met with the Fish and Wildlife Service, and was talking about the work that (US Department of Interior Secretary) Ken Salazar is doing.

There's this whole idea of Cochiti to Elephant Butte and coming up with this Appalachian Trail concept of taking this natural resource and leveraging it, in a very positive way, so that as we look back generations from now, it's even healthier. I fall into that category, I consider myself a conservationist.

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It's like with the green stuff we work with at the city. I have a little different take on 'green.' We want to be sustainable, and we want to be accountable, and we want to be good stewards. I always go back to stewardship, because my grandfathers, one was a rancher and my step-grandfather was a dairy farmer. And my one step-grandfather got a Conservation Pioneer Award for learning how to use the land and leaving it better than he found it. So that's the kind of environment that I grew up around.

But the idea is that I want to use it *and* take care of it. I don't want to fence it off and keep it to where we can't get to it. There are areas, I understand, that that's appropriate, but I don't think this is one of them. And that's the way Salazar is looking at this.

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The one concern I did voice was, I'm all for this, but let's make sure we're also protecting private property rights. I was happy to hear that they already do have a plan where they can do this entire trail without doing any public takings of property. That was important for me. It's not that they shouldn't work with landowners and purchase land when they can, but I just felt like it was one of those things where, let's make sure we're not going in and doing a huge taking of private property when we could do something that doesn't require that. I was told that's certainly the game plan.

So there's one thing I can do as mayor, is to use my bully pulpit, so to speak, and if I can just get people excited and interested, and then we can start looking at funding mechanisms down the road. If we can get a roadmap and a long-range plan about what we can do with these seven intersections, what we can't do, what's appropriate, what's not, what uses are appropriate, what uses aren't, then all of a sudden we have something that can be passed on.

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This has to be a plan that we craft as a community, and we can all be proud when the plan is finished. And then we can start putting things in place that we think are appropriate and making the improvements.

One of the things is access. It's just hard to get down there. One of the things we did on this tour a couple of weeks ago was we just showed people how hard it is. In some places, even if you can park, you have to go over jetty jacks. It's just not easy to get to. And so this idea of wilderness separated by pockets of civilization, so you can feel like you can go through, it'll drive people to go the further distances and get out and explore a little bit more. I think they'll feel safer.

One of the TV reporters I talked to who went along with us with our 'come see the river' tour, I said, 'Have you ever been this close to the river?' and she said, 'I grew up here, and we were always told'—and I'm paraphrasing her here, I can't quote her—'to be afraid of the river, to be afraid of the bosque. That it's a dangerous place.'

And if we can take that concept—by making it safer, making it more accessible, making people feel more comfortable to bring their families down there—I just get really excited about it.

For more information:

ABQ the Plan

<http://www.cabq.gov/mayor/abq-the-plan>