

Short tunnel, long wait

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Randy Randall, executive director of Tourism Santa Fe, front, and Debra Garcia y Griego, director of Santa Fe's Arts Commission, walk through the bicycle/pedestrian underpass nearing completion under St. Francis Drive just north of Cerrillos Road. The underpass incorporates several artistic elements. (Eddie More/Albuquerque Journal)

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SANTA FE, N.M. — More than a decade and around \$6 million in the making, the long-awaited Acequia Trail Underpass beneath St. Francis Drive is nearly complete. The tunnel provides a link between the Railyard Park and the New Mexico School for the Deaf just north

of the intersection with Cerrillos Road. It should be open to bicyclists and pedestrians in about a month.

“We were just children when this project started,” Leroy Pacheco, traffic engineer with the city of Santa Fe’s Public Works Department, joked while walking the site on Thursday.

Pacheco said the concept for a pedestrian/bicycle crossing at the location dates back to at least the late 1990s, when the city ratified a master plan for development of the Railyard District. The idea then was to create a crossing for nonmotorized users connecting the north end of the district with the separate Baca Street section of the Railyard.

But it wasn’t until about a decade later that things got moving.

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“The city initiated the study phase of a nonmotorized crossing at this location nine years ago, in November 2008,” Pacheco said. “The study phase resulted in an interim at-grade trail constructed at this location in 2010, and federal environmental approval for both an underpass and a bridge design at the city’s discretion was granted in 2011.”

The study and construction of the at-grade crossing – essentially providing safer access on either side of St. Francis but with no way to avoid high-speed vehicle traffic except at the St. Francis/Cerrillos intersection’s crosswalks during a red light – totaled about \$500,000. But that was only a temporary remedy.

Meanwhile, a debate ensued over whether the long-term solution should be an overpass or an underpass. Despite some concerns that the tunnel will turn into a hangout for vagrants and a magnet for crime and graffiti, city leaders in 2013 chose to go underground.

But in fact, it’s technically not a tunnel.

Richard Rotto, manager for the Louis Berger Group, which won a nearly \$500,000 construction management contract, says the tunnel

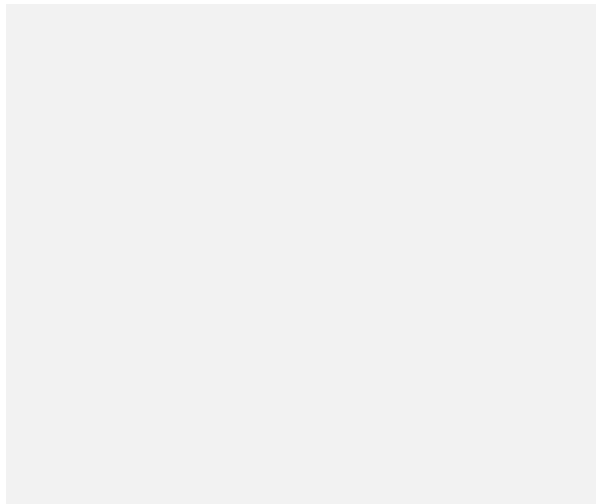
was constructed like a bridge.

“It’s top-down construction,” he said, a technique not uncommon for urban design, as with parking garages. “Basically, we build the bridge and excavate later.”

The work was done by Vital Consulting, of Albuquerque, which won a \$4.3 million construction contract.

The tunnel, or bridge, is almost exactly 150 feet long, with support beams placed 10 feet apart, and 25 feet wide at the midpoint, he said.

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The Acequia Trail Underpass will actually be the second bicycle/pedestrian underpass below St. Francis Drive. The other one is in south Santa Fe near the intersection with Zia Road. But this one will be will be much different.

The design incorporates sustainability elements, including two water retention basins, one at each end of the underpass, for water harvesting. The basins are designed to drain dry within 24 hours so they won't serve as breeding waters for mosquitoes.

“No water that falls on the site, leaves the site,” said Melissa McDonald, the city's watershed coordinator.

True to its name, rainwater will drain into an acequia, or channel, that runs along the north wall of the underpass.

But what will make this underpass different from its counterpart, and from almost any other underpass, are the visual elements.

Tunnel of light

“There was a conscious effort to try to integrate art into the structure,” Rotto said.

Yes, the underpass itself will be a work of art. The city's Arts Commission is contributing \$150,000 to the project through the Arts in Public Places program.

“This was a long-term partnership between the artists, the project engineer and landscaper that required deep collaboration,” said Debra Garcia y Griego, who heads the Arts Commission. “It’s been a long process – certainly longer than anything I’ve previously been involved in – but I feel good about the level of input and the level of responsiveness that occurred.”

The landscape architect for the project is Serquis & Associates, of Santa Fe. Wilco Art and Design was hired as the art firm.

“There have been many, many iterations of this,” said Chrissie Orr, of Wilco.

In February 2014 a design charrette was held at El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe to gather input from the community and come up with a “shared vision” for the project.

Once complete, that vision should be quite a spectacle, featuring light sculptures that not only create a visual effect but serve a practical purpose of illuminating the underpass.

“The idea of the light elements were really the result of public feedback,” Orr said. “The main concern was always safety and making it safe to pass through at night. That’s where the ribs come in.”

The ribs, she said, are meant to give the tunnel a spiral effect. Each one consists of a steel frame with a translucent panel covering LED lights.

“We wanted to create a glowing effect in there,” Orr said.

There will also be LED lighting running the length of the underpass shining down the walls and onto the ceiling to reduce glare. At the midpoint of the underpass there’s a space to allow sunlight to shine through during the day.

There will also be a string of “rainmakers” or “lightcicles,” hanging from the skylight across the width of the underpass.

Other elements were included with the New Mexico School of the Deaf in mind. There will be polished metal plates secured to the ribs that serve as reflectors for light as well as mirrors so those passing through can see what’s behind them.

There will be metal cutouts in the shape of birds along the walls on both sides. Orr said that idea came in part as an effort to incorporate Santa Fe's patron saint, St. Francis of Assisi, into the design. After all, the underpass runs beneath St. Francis Drive. He is also the patron saint of animals and is often portrayed with birds.

“We got the birds in there to express freedom of flight and rainmakers to bring a sense of nature and compassion,” Orr said.

The underpass walls are cobalt blue and yellow ochre. Blue is intended to reflect the sky, she said, so the space wouldn't feel so claustrophobic. The colors will appear to change as the light shines in from different angles, she said.

The trail itself will be a 10-foot-wide strip of concrete, but there will also be a strip of porphyry, a kind of stone tile, running alongside for texture and to serve as a pedestrian walkway, allowing bicycles to pass on the smooth concrete surface.

Work delays

The project has been subject to several delays. After starting work in September of last year, what was initially intended to be a six- to nine-month project was halted over the winter, “in the interest of

public safety,” according to a news release from the city. Work resumed in April but was delayed again due to a hang-up over landscaping.

Still, there was never any major disruptions to traffic. At times traffic was restricted to one lane in each direction, but much of the work was done at night so as not to snarl traffic at one of the most-traveled crossroads in the city.

The project did result in a cost overrun, as the City Council last week approved a contract amendment providing an additional \$119,000 for construction management, which was blamed on suspending work over the winter.

In all, the total cost will approach \$6 million, most of it from the federal government. Approximately \$620,000 was spent on design. The cost of construction, including the increase to the management contract, totaled about \$5.1 million.

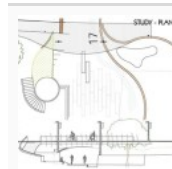
Most of it is being paid for by state and federal grants, with about \$3.3 million coming from Federal Air Quality and Congestion Management Flexible Funds.

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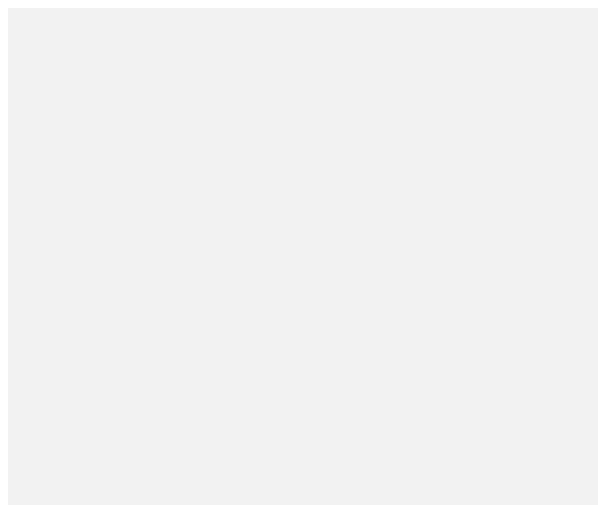


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