



NWNMCOG | NORTHWEST NEW MEXICO COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

February 17, 2021

The Road Less Traveled Gets National Attention

Federal Highway Administration Designates Regional Scenic Byway

Aztec, N.M. – The Trail of the Ancients Byway of New Mexico was one of 34 National Scenic Byways and 15 All-American Roads designated by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) on Tuesday. Our Byway Committee, staff, and network of partners had been lying in wait for over ten years until the Reviving America’s Scenic Byway Act was signed into a law on September 22, 2019. This act provided the opportunity to apply for National designation, and our region was determined to make the case that our byway is a national treasure.

“This is a great example of the how the Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments (COG) can be a regional force for good, facilitating a unity of purpose that benefits every community in our region. Being the only byway designated in New Mexico (in 2021) makes this a very big deal and I know that at a heart level this is redemption from the bitter disappointment of not being selected in 2009. Our staff and many partners were highly motivated to win this for our region as this designation brings widespread attention that is needed to spur recovery in our hospitality industry that has been decimated by the pandemic.” -- Billy Moore, Chairman of the Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments

The byway is critical to drive regional tourism and connects to our sister Trail of the Ancients byways in Utah and Colorado that are already Nationally designated. Once Navajo Nation and State of Arizona byways are connected, the Four Corners will have a mega-byway that will be the crown jewel of geotourism in the world. Geotourism is defined as tourism that sustains or enhances the geographic character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents. The Four Corners has long been an international destination, but the challenge has been to circulate, capture, and create wealth that sticks in every place along the byway. The byway can be a backbone to bring the market to place-based businesses, artisans, and authentic site doing opportunities.

Established in 1991, the National Scenic Byways Program recognizes roadways with notable scenic, historic, cultural, natural, recreational, and archaeological qualities. The Trail of the Ancients Byway of New Mexico has it all, but for purposes of the application, we chose to focus archaeological as the defining intrinsic quality. From Chaco Canyon to El Morro National Monument, the Trail of the Ancients provides a window into the cultural continuum that is laid bare against the drama of the terrain.

A quick history of byway development:

2002: State of New Mexico lifts moratorium on designating new State byways and announces a deadline for nominations of new State scenic byway designation. COG rallies the region, assembles a steering committee, defines the byway, and submits a nomination application for the Native Heritage Trail. State of New Mexico designates the Native Heritage Trail as a State scenic byway.

2007: Successfully petitioned the State Transportation Commission to rename this byway as “Trail of the Ancients” New Mexico as this evaluate the byway’s chance to gain Federal status in connection with TOTA-CO and TOTA-UT that were already designated, and the hopes of getting a Four Corners byway in all four States.

2008: A Corridor Management Plan was completed for the byway.

2008–09: The Trail of the Ancients Byway Association, supported by the COG, developed and submitted an application for Federal nominate as a National scenic byway, but were rejected.

2009–12: The Trail of the Ancients Byway Association was active facilitated by the COG and received several byway grants including signage, kiosks at State/Federal/local visitor centers, marketing, and physical improvements.

2012–19: The Trail of the Ancients Byway Association morphed into other initiatives or associations including Region 1 Tourism Board, Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO), and/ or Four Corners Geotourism Stewardship Council.

The COG is excited to ready next steps including:

- Re-energize our Byway Committee and update our Corridor Management Plan including identifying and seeking investments for needed byway enhancements.
- Seek and train Byway Leaders by reaching out to Utah and Colorado as well as sponsoring Byway training.
- Connect the dots of State and Federal resources to local needs to re-open, re-energize, expand, and start enterprises certified as New Mexico True that proliferate arrival to departure hospitality.
- Soliciting sponsors for a marketing campaign including launch of the Four Corners Geotourism website.
- Standing up several programs that provide regional tools and resources for economic development and community capacity-building including a revolving loan fund and AmeriCorps*VISTA program.

The COG applauds both the Trump and Biden Administrations, the Federal Highway Administration, and our New Mexico Congressional Delegation that made this opportunity and award a reality. Also, the COG appreciates Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, our Legislative Delegation, State Transportation Commissioners Taylor and Lundstrom, and every State agency for mobilizing support to put New Mexico on the map. Special recognition to Robert Kuipers, Program Manager, of the Regional Transportation Planning Organization housed at the COG as he has been a fierce advocate and steward of the byway vision and Carrie House, Associate Planner who brought our application to life by mapping and inventorying the byway.

As a regional agency, our organizing principle is to bring the region together in the belief that what is good for one is good for all. We believe that we are stronger together and only united can we transform our economy from boom-bust to robust.

About Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments

Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments (NWNMCOG) is 50-year-old regional development organization (RDO) recognized and empowered by the State of New Mexico and the US Economic Development Administration. We serve the entire three-county region of Cibola, McKinley, and San Juan counties and the communities therewithin to improve community and economy for the region and its people. The NWNMCOG is association of nine local governments governed by a Board of Directors unified by the belief that we are stronger together and only united can we advance on regional opportunities and tackle regional challenges from sustainable water supply, to behavior health, to strategic infrastructure, and to regional economic development. For more information about NWNMCOG, visit www.nwnmcog.com.

About the Trail of the Ancients Byway

NM Tourism Department Byway Page: <https://www.newmexico.org/places-to-visit/scenic-byways/trail-of-the-ancients/>

Four Corners Geotourism: <https://fourcornersgeotourism.com/>

Related Press Releases:

USDOT FHWA: <https://highways.dot.gov/newsroom/usdot-announces-new-americas-bywaysr-designations>

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