

Pagosa Wetland Partners (PWP) - 2021 Year End Summary Report

Prepared by Randy McCormick, Jan. 8, 2022

Mission: To Protect, Conserve and Enhance the Health and Beauty of the Riverwalk Wetlands.

Background and Overview:

Pagosa Wetland Partners was created by a small group of concerned citizens in 2019 to examine the potential risks to the ecological integrity of the Pagosa Springs Riverwalk Wetlands and to explore various strategies to avoid and/or mitigate those risks. We benefitted immensely from the guidance and steadfast commitment of Bob Lecour during those challenging first months. Bob was our north star and guiding light, and PWP would never have been created without his steadfast vision and unwavering support.

On January 19, 2020, in order to facilitate our mission, the initial collaborators agreed to utilize the following guidelines identified in **Chapter 2 of the Archuleta County Community Plan, 2017**, shown below.

- Policy 2.1 – *Development and Planning processes will consider preservation of wildlife habitat to minimize the possibility of plant and animal species becoming endangered or extinct.*
- Policy 2.2 – *New development avoids, minimizes or mitigates damage and disruption to wildlife and unique biological features, wildlife habitat and other environmentally sensitive areas.*
- Policy 2.3 – *Water conservation should be used in new residential and commercial development.*
- Policy 2.4 – *New development is encouraged to use landscaping practices that conserve water and enhance the appearance of the built environment.*

In addition, we support the guidelines specified in **Goal N1 and Goal N2 of the “Pagosa Springs Forward” Community Plan, 2018**, shown below.

Goal N1: *“Protect and conserve water resources, water quality, the San Juan River corridor, streams, lakes, wetlands, and geothermal resources.”*

- Action A - *Strengthen regulatory approaches in the LUDC such as requiring certain setbacks from the edge of water bodies for buildings and Best Management Practices to protect water quality.*
- Action B – *Develop environmental educational materials to inform the development community, residents and others about water quality . . . and Best Management Practices to protect water quality.*
- Action C – *Consider adopting local wetlands regulations into the LUDC to ensure wetland areas are protected, or if disturbance is unavoidable, the impacts are minimized and mitigated.*

Goal N2: *“Develop guidelines, regulations, and educational programs that protect area wildlife.”*

- *Action A - Continue to work with Colorado Parks and Wildlife and Colorado Department of Transportation as applicable, in the development review process and in creating wildlife-friendly land use guidelines. . . .*
- *Action B - Consider amending the LUDC to incorporate wildlife protection provisions such as ensuring the provision of wildlife movement corridors through property greater than five acres*
- *Action C - Provide wildlife interpretive areas along trails, parks and open space where feasible.*
- *Action D - Provide “Living with Wildlife” education and information to ensure wildlife is protected.*
- *Action F - Create a wildlife coexistence plan to provide policies and implementation measures for the Pagosa Springs community to sustainably coexist with wildlife*

Pagosa Wetland Partners believe in the value of open, collaborative efforts to meet challenges. We introduced ourselves to the Town Council at a work session on February 27th, 2020 during which we explained our concerns and the need for caution to protect the unique values associated with the Riverwalk Wetlands. Since then, we continued to advance our objectives in various ways throughout 2021. Midyear we formalized our relationship with the Weminuche Audubon Society (WAS) and PWP was accepted as a committee within the overall structure of WAS. This allows PWP to benefit from the WAS 501c3 not-for-profit status and to accept monetary donations.

The Town of Pagosa Springs began a process to re-write its Land Use Development Code (LUDC) this past year and that became a unique opportunity for PWP to have its voice heard. Barry Knott became an LUDC committee member and worked tirelessly on behalf of Pagosa Wetland Partners during 2021 to encode needed protections for the Riverwalk. While doing this he created valuable working relationships with the committee members and the Town staff.

Report From Barry Knott: Land Use Development Code Update, December 2021:

Here is a summary of the LUDC work concerning wetland protections. The devil will be in the details which are yet to come. The LUDC committee agreed that the traditional approach to protecting our downtown wetlands by specifying a unilateral setback distance, in the LUDC, for new development did not work particularly well for environmentalists or developers and certainly did not do the wetlands justice. Too small a setback would not protect our sensitive flora and fauna while too large a setback might unfairly restrict development. The unique nature of our wetlands demanded a more sensitive approach. In place of specifying a unilateral setback we agreed to let science be the town's guide. Future proposed development next to the downtown wetlands will require the developer to undertake an independent 3rd party environmental assessment (at their expense) of the environmental risks, threats and impact to the wetlands. Appropriate mitigations and setbacks necessary to protect the wetlands will be a key deliverable of the environmental assessment and must be adopted by the developer. Any and all development proposals adjacent to the downtown wetlands must comply.

The solution allows for the use of good science and best wetland practices to be adopted rather than using a fixed and somewhat arbitrary setback distance. The solution reflects our committee's consensus that *the health of the wetlands is vital to the future of Pagosa Springs*, deserving of special protections (because of their unique warm water flows), and not to be sacrificed in the name of progress.

Our Town Council has to approve the entire LUDC rewrite and reserves the right to modify its content. I am confident they will approve the proposed LUDC wetlands protections sometime in 2022. I will finish out my work on the LUDC committee and then step away from my leadership role with Pagosa Wetland Partners. The efforts of the entire Pagosa Wetland Partners have not gone unnoticed in the community, by the town, or our developers. You all have raised the awareness of our warm water wetlands and served notice that any and all threats to our downtown wetlands, well intentioned or not, will be vigorously challenged.

I believe I speak for us all when I say how grateful we are for Barry's exemplary efforts on PWP's behalf. His commitment, diligent problem-solving skills, and unique ability to navigate diverse personalities and perspectives has made him a cornerstone of our efforts to achieve our mission.

Ongoing Projects:

During the past year Barry and I created an opportunity to engage in conversations with David Dronet who is, and would be, our principal contact person for discussions about the proposed development upslope from the wetlands. These were frank, open conversations about our concerns and Mr. Dronet maintained an open and constructive dialog that we felt was very helpful. Ongoing discussions are expected as we move forward in time.

While examining documents related to the conservation easements that exist in the wetlands, we realized that the original required management plans had expired. Management plans are critical to the ongoing efforts to maintain the ecological integrity of this unique conservation area. It became obvious that a new, updated plan was needed. We obtained a proposal from Ecosphere Environmental Services to create an updated management plan that would meet our needs. Ecosphere was selected because they had created the previous plan and were very familiar with our site. We were pleased with their proposal, but unfortunately, we were unable to secure the funding to make it possible. This, in my opinion, should be very high on our wish list for 2022.

Environmental outreach and education are fundamental to building support for ongoing conservation efforts. In our case, this involved recruiting and training volunteers to provide guided tours to the public so people could realize that this remarkable wetland area is theirs to enjoy, theirs to explore, and theirs to protect. The target audience includes residents, visitors, businesses, and organizations. The goal is to create memorable nature-based experiences for participants and to build a community-wide sense of value for the wetlands. The tireless efforts of Jeanette and Josh Pike played a major role in the development and success of the Riverwalk Naturalist program. Their commitment and hard work, along with a wonderful team of volunteer guides, made this new program a resounding success for PWP in 2021. To them we are eternally grateful. See the exciting details below.

Report from Josh and Jeanette Pike; Community Outreach and Engagement 2021:

Throughout 2021, regular articles have been published in the Pagosa Sun newspaper to educate the readership about wetland ecology, and to encourage them to recognize the value of the Riverwalk wetlands. To accompany our ongoing outreach articles in local media, PWP has long wanted to create an outreach program that would take locals and visitors into the wetlands and enable them to directly engage with the natural beauty there. This year, PWP was able to accomplish this goal with the creation of the Riverwalk Naturalist Program (RNP). Initially conceived by Randy McCormick, this program offered guided naturalist tours of the Riverwalk Wetlands that gave their participants a chance to learn about and appreciate the wetlands.

The RNP program was met with extraordinary public support on all fronts. The initial public meeting to announce the program was held in April 2021. It was attended by over 50 people and 11 of these attendees went on to complete an intensive two-month program of training and tour delivery practice to become RNP guides. Throughout our tour season, from early July to the end of September, our dedicated guides provided 3 tours a week, engaging a total of 141 tour participants across the season. All tours were free of charge and fully accessible to people of all ages and abilities. Throughout the season, the guides showed extraordinary dedication and flexibility, smoothly adapting to weather and schedule changes alike. Together, from training to the end of the touring season, the guides invested approximately 300 hours of volunteer time into the program.

The public response to the RNP program was equally positive. We were fortunate to share the sponsorship of the program with the Springs Resort, who printed the thousands of promotional brochures our volunteers distributed to local businesses across the community. Tour participants, including 71 locals and 70 visitors, were quite enthusiastic, with almost all participants expressing a deepened knowledge and enjoyment of the wetlands and an increased interest in protecting them. The tours also produced a large number of letters of appreciation and several substantial donations towards PWP's umbrella organization Weminuche Audubon Society and the continuation of the RNP program. Overall, the program was a great success, clearly fulfilling PWP's outreach goals of creating engagement with the community about the wetlands, building a sense of their intrinsic value, and increasing support for the protection of the Riverwalk wetlands.

We will continue the RNP tours for the Summer 2022 season. After analyzing the data for the 2021 season, we plan to extend the touring season into June, as well as offering a greater variety and number of tours a week. We also plan to expand and streamline the training curriculum from last year, and to increase the base number of guides. We believe with these steps, and building upon 2021's groundswell of community support, the RNP tours can continue to be a crucial and productive venue for community engagement about the Riverwalk Wetlands for the year to come.

Looking Forward:

As we look forward into 2022, I see many opportunities to advance our mission. However, there will certainly be challenges and obstacles we will need to overcome. Some are listed below:

- The hydrology of wetlands determines their life or death. Three things are needed to keep a wetland system healthy, and they all revolve around the water entering the wetland: quality of the water, quantity of water, and the timing of its delivery. In order to make sure this is managed properly; we need to be monitoring it. An updated management plan would include suitable water monitoring protocols. In the meantime, we have invested in water quality monitoring equipment and we will begin monitoring this January and monthly thereafter. Contact us if you wish to participate.
- Expanded community outreach and education will be required to build our base of support. Get involved, and become part of a community of volunteers who will take a stand in support of wise management of our Riverwalk Wetlands. Learn and enjoy as you help protect.
- Spend time on our Riverwalk. Move slowly, observe the sounds, smells, and colors of this remarkable place. Sit awhile and soak up the peace and serenity that comes from close contact with Nature. After all, it is yours to explore, yours to enjoy, and yours to protect. Also, please share this information with your family, friends and associates.

You can contact us at pagosawetlands@gmail.com or on Facebook at:

www.facebook.com/Pagosawetlands/