

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED



COURTESY OF FRIENDS OF THE SANDIA MOUNTAINS

Ralph Kopp, foreground, a volunteer with Friends of the Sandia Mountains, works to create a new addition to the Challenge Trail on the east side of the Sandias. Expected to be completed in summer 2023, the trail will stretch 10 miles and have 3,000-feet of elevation gain. See story, [A3](#)



COURTESY FRIENDS OF THE SANDIA MOUNTAINS

Roland Stumpf, a volunteer, uses a pickaxe to make a new trail on the east side of the Sandia Mountains. Friends of the Sandia Mountains have spent two years making a new addition to the Challenge Trail.

Trail extension coming to east side of Sandias

It should be finished in spring and open to the public this summer

Copyright © 2023 Albuquerque Journal

BY RYAN BOETEL
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Albuquerque outdoor enthusiasts have one last gift under their trees: a new way to scale or descend the Sandia Mountains.

The Friends of the Sandia Mountains are among the volunteers who have spent two years building an extension to the Challenge Trail, which is expected to be finished sometime in the summer. Once completed, hikers, mountain bikers, skiers or other users could challenge themselves on a 10-mile, one-way trail with about 3,000-feet of elevation change on the east side of the Sandias, said Sam Beard, a co-founder of the group.

The original trail was built in the 1970s as a cross country ski course. It is marked with blue diamonds attached to trees so people can navigate the course in the winter months when snow is on the ground.

TRAIL >>

From **PAGE A3**

It tops out near the Ellis Trailhead, which is not far from Sandia Crest. It originally descended to the Sandia Peak Ski area, making it a 4.5-mile trail that dropped from 10,300 to 8,600 feet, Beard said.

Jenny Blackmore, who leads a trail construction crew for Friends of the Sandia Mountains, said the new section will go from the ski area farther down the mountain, running roughly parallel of N.M. 536 to the Doc Long Picnic Area, one of the first landmarks people see after entering the Cibola National Forest on the east side of the range.

The project has been under way for about two years. Though construction won't be possible during the winter months, Blackmore said much of the hard work is over. The trail should be finished in the spring and open to the public sometime in summer 2023.

It's tedious and tiresome work to make a new trail. Blackmore's crew uses pickaxes and other tools to carve out the trail after others have cleared the land of fallen trees and other debris.

If the ground is level and not rocky, the group can cut a mile of trail in about three, five-hour sessions, she said. But if it's rocky and hilly, the group can huff and puff through about six of those sessions to create a quarter of a mile of trail.

"After that's complete, people can take the Challenge Trail all the way from pretty much the top to the bottom of the mountain," she said. "So that's pretty exciting."

Blackmore said the addition will also create a new loop on the lower portion of the east side of the Sandias by linking the Challenge section with the Oso Corredor Trail.

She said the groups who are making the trail are working under the advisement of the Forest Service's Sandia Ranger District. District officials couldn't be reached for comment.

With so many access points on all different sides of the Sandias, they are the most-visited mountains in New Mexico, according to the Forest Service's website, which said millions of people visit the range each year.

Providing another large trail where users can cover wide swaths of ground while staying on one trail should relieve some of the crowds in the mountains, which flank Albuquerque's east side.

"You know, there's so many users, especially bikers that use the trails now, sometimes they get a little bit crowded," Blackmore said. "And so it's one more way to spread out the users."