

NEW MEXICO HISTORIC SITES

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November 4, 2025

To: Museum of New Mexico Board of Regents

From: Anne McCudden, Executive Director, New Mexico Historic Sites (NMHS)

Re: Request to approve future potential action on El Camino Real Historic Trail Site

Background & Summary

El Camino Real Historic Trail Site (Site) opened in November of 2005 to commemorate *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*, one of the most significant historic trails in Mexico, Texas, and New Mexico. The \$10 million facility, operated by the New Mexico Historic Sites (NMHS) division of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs (NMDCA) was located on property patented to the Museum of New Mexico Board of Regents (BOR) by the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Initial visitation to the Site was strong, with approximately 10,000 visitors in 2006. However, by 2014 and 2015, visitation had reached below 1,000 annually (Exhibit A). The Site was averaging less than \$5,000 in admission revenue while costing the state \$400,000 a year to operate (Exhibit B). In November 2016, then Cabinet Secretary Veronica Gonzales closed the Site due to the lack of visitors versus the cost of operation, coupled with failures in the building's mechanical systems and lack of staffing.

Several factors contributed to the inability to successfully operate the Site:

- **Location**—While located off US I-25, the Site is 38 miles from Socorro and 44 miles from Truth or Consequences with no direct exit from the interstate. Once visitors exited via Exit 115, they traveled nearly 5 miles to the site, much of it along an unpaved road.
- **Lack of Direct Connection to El Camino Real**—The actual historic trail is located on the east side of the Rio Grande on private property nearly 10 miles from the Site. Although site visitors could see some important geological features such as the Fra Cristobal Mountains and the Black Mesa, the trail itself is inaccessible from the property.

- **Failed BLM Partnership**—Initially, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between BLM and NMHS for “a joint partnership in the operation of the site with fiscal support from the BLM.” This original concept had the Site operating with a staff of 12 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees, including maintenance personnel, to oversee the HVAC, fire suppression, and security and water systems as well as to perform advanced maintenance work for the building. It is unknown if any funding from the BLM materialized, but by 2008, BLM had withdrawn from the MOU and played no role in the daily operation of the Site.
- **Staffing Challenges**—It is unknown how many staff were employed when the Site opened in 2005, but the 12 FTEs envisioned via the BLM partnership never materialized. By 2012, there were 3 FTEs, which fell to 2 FTEs before the site closed in 2016. Documents indicate issues with staffing included, “limited staff competency in respect to visitor services” and “lack of staff competency in interpretive ability about the site and El Camino Real history.”
- **Facility Deficiencies**—Original construction defects and the absence of trained, dedicated facilities staff resulted in numerous ongoing facilities issues and high costs of maintenance/operations. Single-phase electricity was originally installed, which was inadequate for a building that required three-phase power. As a result, the HVAC system operated inconsistently and routinely failed at peak periods, and electrical systems were prone to surges and blackouts. This in turn limited telecommunication, data, security, and fire alarm systems. Exhibit lighting and audio-visual displays broke down and the water fountain inside the building began to seep water into the surrounding displays. The roof failed, causing leaks into the offices, and holes on the exterior of the building caused substantial rodent/insect infestations.

Following the closure, the Site was secured and staff assigned to monitor it regularly. Collection items were returned to lenders. Education items and interpretive materials were transferred back to the Friends Group, to the City of Socorro, or brought to Fort Selden Historic Site. The large public art piece commissioned by Greg Reiche in 2004 to mark the entrance to the Site remains on-site. However, the piece, which was acquired by New Mexico Arts' Public Art Program with joint funding from the City of Socorro, will be relocated to Socorro. Currently, the city is acquiring funds to support the relocation.

Since the site closed, NMHS and DCA have pursued alternative uses for the site, including identifying a replacement tenant. This has encompassed contacting statewide higher education institutions, other state agencies, federal agencies, private enterprises, and municipalities (Exhibit C). These efforts have failed to yield a partner or tenant.

While the Site was subject to occasional vandalism since its closure, media coverage on November 23, 2021, drew attention to its remote location and lack of personnel. Instances of theft and destructive acts marked a dramatic increase following the report. This included multiple events in which copper wire was stripped from the building, causing the failure of the electrical, HVAC, and water systems; glass windows were destroyed, exposing the interior of the building to wind and rain; and general acts of destruction to the entire building envelope. Collectively, these incidents along with pests and environmental conditions have led to the exponential decline of the facility. The building is no longer safely habitable.

Having explored numerous possibilities for tenants and potential transfer, increasing costs and liability concerns have compelled NMHS and DCA to explore remaining options of 1) full rehabilitation, or 2) removal of the Site:

- Rehabilitation—A third-party condition assessment report was obtained. Completed in July of 2025, the report indicated that it would take a minimum of \$3.465M to repair the facility to a basic operational state (Exhibit D). This would not address any costs needed to make the site a functional museum or any other alternative .
- Removal—A quote was obtained for site demolition. The initial quote indicated that just under \$900,000 would be required to remove all structures and infrastructure (Exhibit E).

Given the underlying challenges with operation of the Site, the lack of a feasible alternative tenant use for the site, and the cost differential in the two options, it is the recommendation of staff that the BOR approve the removal/demolition of the El Camino Real Historic Trail Site. Staff could then seek to work with BLM to revert the property back to BLM ownership.

Since closing the Site in 2016, NMHS has incorporated El Camino Real interpretation into a broader region which includes Fort Selden, Taylor-Mesilla, Coronado, and Los Luceros historic sites, all of which are located on El Camino Real and share interpretive components. Additionally, NMHS is part of a tri-national effort led by the International Council on Monuments and Sites, along with 21 other agencies, working to extend the UNESCO World Heritage Convention's Transnational and Transboundary designation of El Camino Real from Mexico into the US via Texas and New Mexico. Between our current offerings and this new trail designation opportunity, we are confident that we will be able to interpret this historical, environmental, and cultural treasure in ways that reach far beyond our current spaces.

Requested Action:

Due to a combination of low attendance, high operating costs, a remote and inaccessible location, failed partnerships, and extreme structural decline caused by defects and post-closure vandalism, staff recommend the demolition of El Camino Real Historic Trail Site estimated at under \$900,000, rather than pursuing the minimum \$3.465 million needed for rehabilitation.

Staff further recommends the BOR authorize NMHS/DCA to issue notice of removal to BLM and request reversion of the property.