

## ***Preliminary plan to restore San Miguel River on Valley Floor***

Project has \$1.6 million price tag

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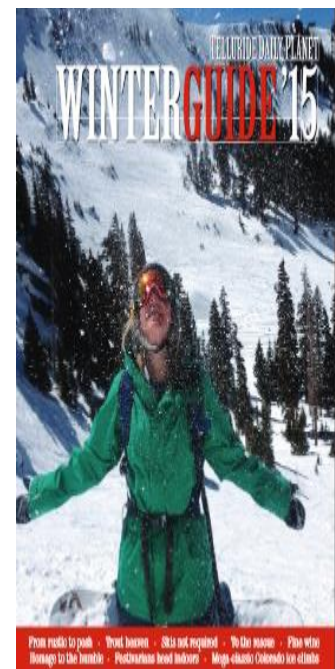
When Telluride purchased the Valley Floor in 2008 with the intention of preserving the open space in perpetuity, organizers immediately got to work figuring out how to restore any human tinkering that had degraded the wilderness.

One of the biggest human impacts on the Valley Floor was the channelization of the once-meandering San Miguel River approximately 125 years ago, pushing the waterway into an unnatural straight line on the western edge of the valley. That crime against nature could be reversed in a \$1.6 million plan presented to Telluride Town Council on Tuesday.

The ambitious engineering project would focus on a section of the river from the sewer lagoons near Entrada to Boomerang Road, restoring the flow to the historic route of the river — a pathway that can be seen in old photographs and is hinted at in the current topography of the 570-acre green space.

“What we’re doing in this situation is we’re actually moving the flow path of the San Miguel River,” said Dave Blauch, a senior ecologist for Ecological Resource Consultants, Inc., a group that is assisting in the river restoration project. “The concept has been to pull it out on the Valley Floor to function more naturally.”

Blauch told council members of the many environmental benefits that the project would create: the restoration of approximately 5,000 linear feet of aquatic and riparian habitat, the elimination of a highly unnatural water channel, the restoration of natural flood cycles and



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the improvement of the natural habitat.

The new — but really quite old — river channel would be cut with excavation equipment and the project would be a disruptive sight to see on the protected land while underway.

Hilary Cooper, a member of the committee focused on the river restoration project, told council members that the benefits of the project would far outweigh one season of construction disruption.

“This is a long-term project with long-term benefits. Short term impacts, especially visually to the community, will be pretty significant. But hopefully we all have the capacity to look into the future at the benefits and realize that we’ve been working toward this for a long time,” she said.

Council member Todd Brown also noted that the project had long been in the works.

“This has been envisioned since the acquisition of the Valley Floor, maybe prior to that: getting the river back to its more geologic, historic proportions. And this reach is the one that is the most environmentally challenged right now,” Brown said.

The preliminary study of the river restoration project was funded by the Valley Floor Preservation Partners to the tune of \$15,000, with another \$5,000 contributed by private conservation organization Trout Unlimited.

The river restoration is a significant financial piece of a comprehensive plan to restore the Valley Floor, a project whose price tag Telluride Program Director Lance McDonald said is more than \$5 million, per a 2011 estimate. The effort also includes the restoration of sewer lagoons on the west end of the parcel (already approved by council and slated to occur later this year) as well as the restoration of other reaches of the river and the neutralization of a tailings pile just above Lawson Hill.

McDonald told council members that the earliest the project could get started would be next year, and is contingent upon the approval of final designs and a project budget that will be presented to town council in the summer. He added that conservation groups have expressed interest in helping fund the project.