To: **RFTA Board of Directors**
RFTA Staff

From: **Chris Lane, Executive Director, Aspen Center for Environmental Studies**

Re: **Follow Up to RFTA Board Issues Regarding the Eco-Trail Licenses at Rock Bottom Ranch**

Date: **August 27, 2015**

At your last meeting, you asked me to return to discuss possible solutions to three issues regarding the proposed Eco-Trail connections to the Rio Grande Trail. To summarize, those issues are as follows:

1. Compatibility of the trail connections with RFTA policy documents, including the Access Control Plan and the Comprehensive Plan for the Rail Corridor;

2. A justification for two access points as opposed to one;

3. The safety of the intersections, particularly the interface between slower moving traffic entering and exiting the Eco-Trail System and higher speed traffic on the Rio Grande Trail.

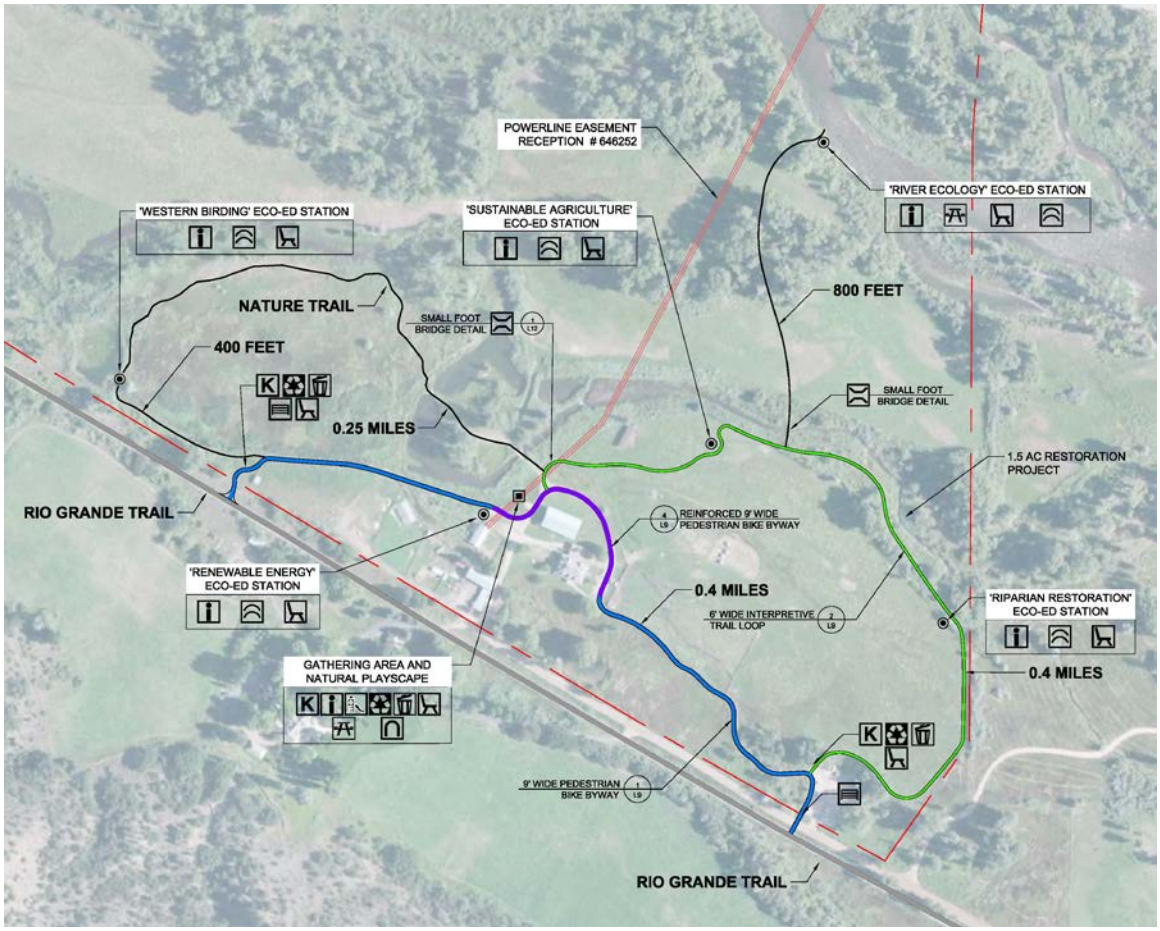
As a short introduction, the "Eco-Ed" trail will feature a number of educational stations and a natural playscape and gathering area, all interconnected with a trail system internal to the Rock Bottom Ranch that begins and ends on the Rio Grande Trail. The Eco-Trail system will permit Rock Bottom Ranch to expand its teaching curriculum and allow more users to visit the ranch. The ranch's location adjacent to the Rio Grande Trail will allow recreational users on the trail the opportunity to utilize the assets at Rock Bottom Ranch in a car-free, bike-oriented manner.

Here are our responses to the issues raised at your last meeting:

1. **Conformance with RFTA Access Control Plan and other Corridor Plans:** The Access Control Plan is used by RFTA as a tool with which to manage crossings of the rail corridor. Preserving connectivity and continuous flow, which is accomplished by managing and limiting new crossings is of particular importance to the future transit use of the corridor. Crossings of various types and traffic flows are defined and discussed in the plan, which focuses on road and driveway crossings. Intersections with other trails are defined in the document and "encroachments". It is our feeling that trail connections like the Eco-Trail that do not cross the corridor but rather join it, do not affect the intent of the plan. The Eco-Trail connections are also compliant with the "railbanked" status of the rail corridor, which allows for the interim use of the corridor for trail purposes.

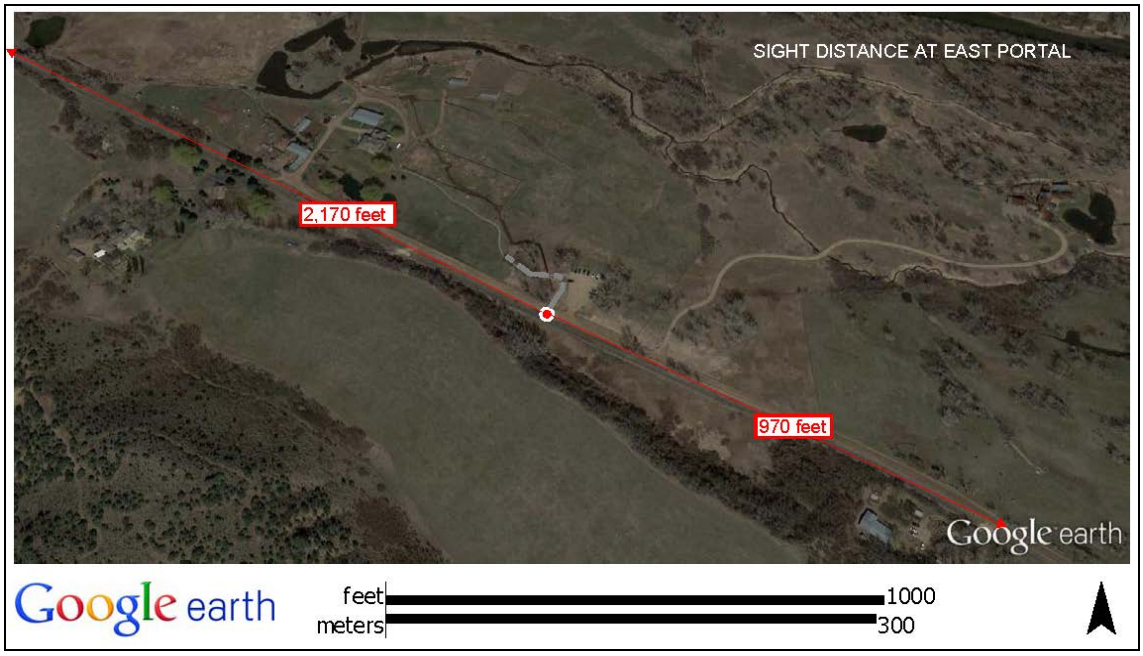
   The Eco-Trail connections also appear to be compatible with the Comprehensive Plan for the rail corridor. Although the connections are located within a "Conservation Area", trails such as the Eco-Trail system are not one of the improvements or uses that are prohibited within these areas. In addition, the Comprehensive Plan encourages linkages with existing and proposed trails.

2. **Need for Two Eco-Trail Connections:** Two portals, one to the east and one to the west, will make the Eco-Trail system a continual or "extension" trail as opposed to an "out-and-back" trail. This gives the user the perception that a smaller amount of trip time will be required. The dual connections allow for a "drive through" experience that is more easily negotiated with less concern of getting lost. The side trip to Rock Bottom Ranch becomes part of the trip as opposed to an additional excursion to the trip, making it easier for people to justify experiencing the Rock Bottom Ranch since they don't have to backtrack to rejoin the Rio Grande Trail.



I can best express the importance of the two intersections by describing to you a common user scenario: Say you are a young parent out with your spouse and children biking the Rio Grande Trail. You come across what appears to be a trailhead at the Rock Bottom Ranch, so you pull off the Rio Grande trail to read what is on the kiosk and get a better idea of where this trail goes. From the trail map you can see that there are looped trails within RBR that could be explored either on bike or on foot. You notice that there are educational stations that could help you teach your kids about farming and the environment, and there is a playscape for your kids to have some fun while you take a break and watch them. Finally, you can see that trail reconnects to the Rio Grande trail, so you can easily take the Eco-Trail with your family and you won't have to backtrack to continue your journey down the Rio Grande. With this information, deciding to take the Eco Trail is an easy choice!

3. **Safety at the Intersections:** Two safety concerns were vocalized at the last meeting – adequate sight distance and congestion at the intersections. Sight distance at both intersections range from 770- to 2,170-feet and is virtually unrestricted provided that trial-side ground cover is cut when it becomes overgrown:

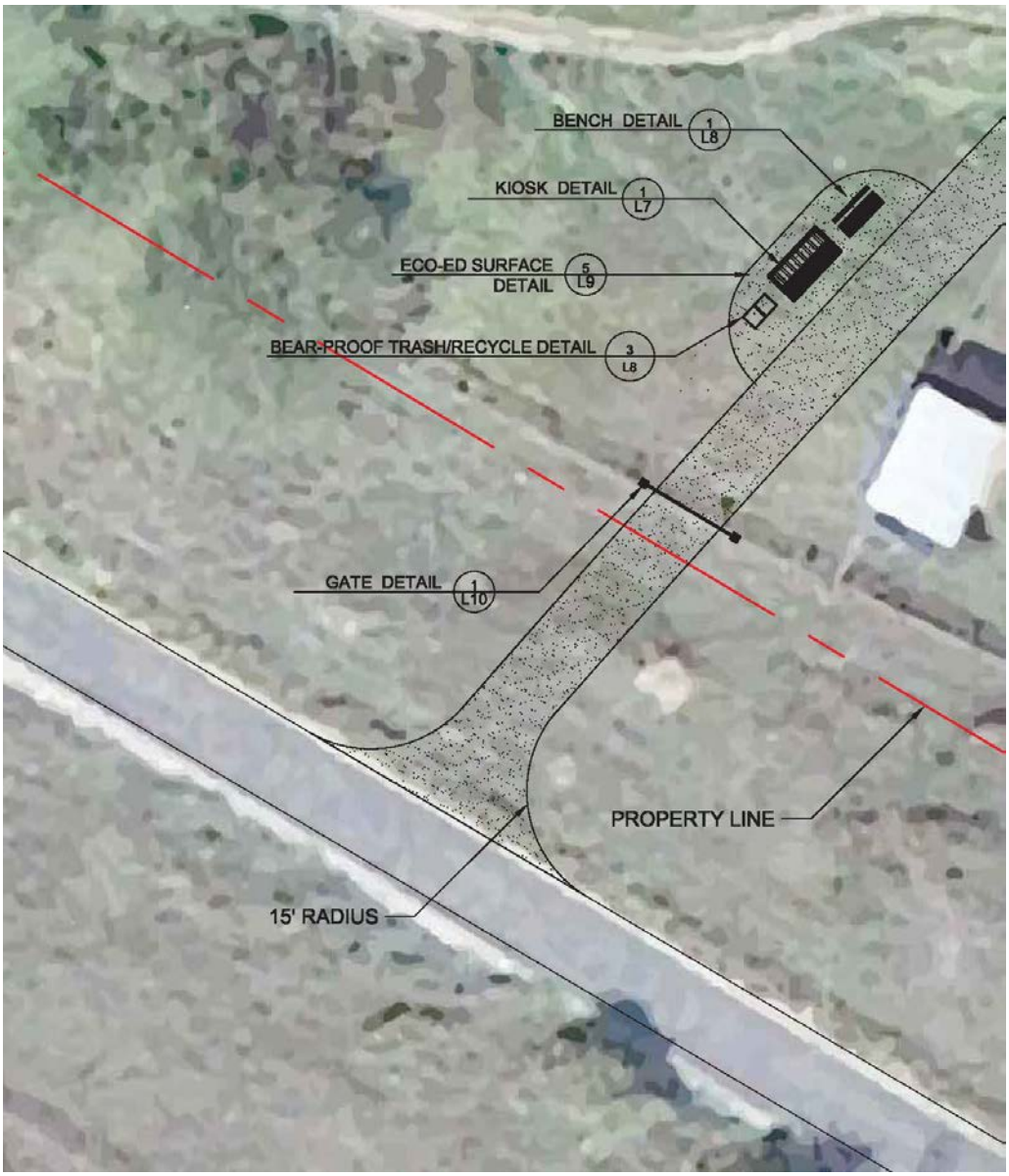


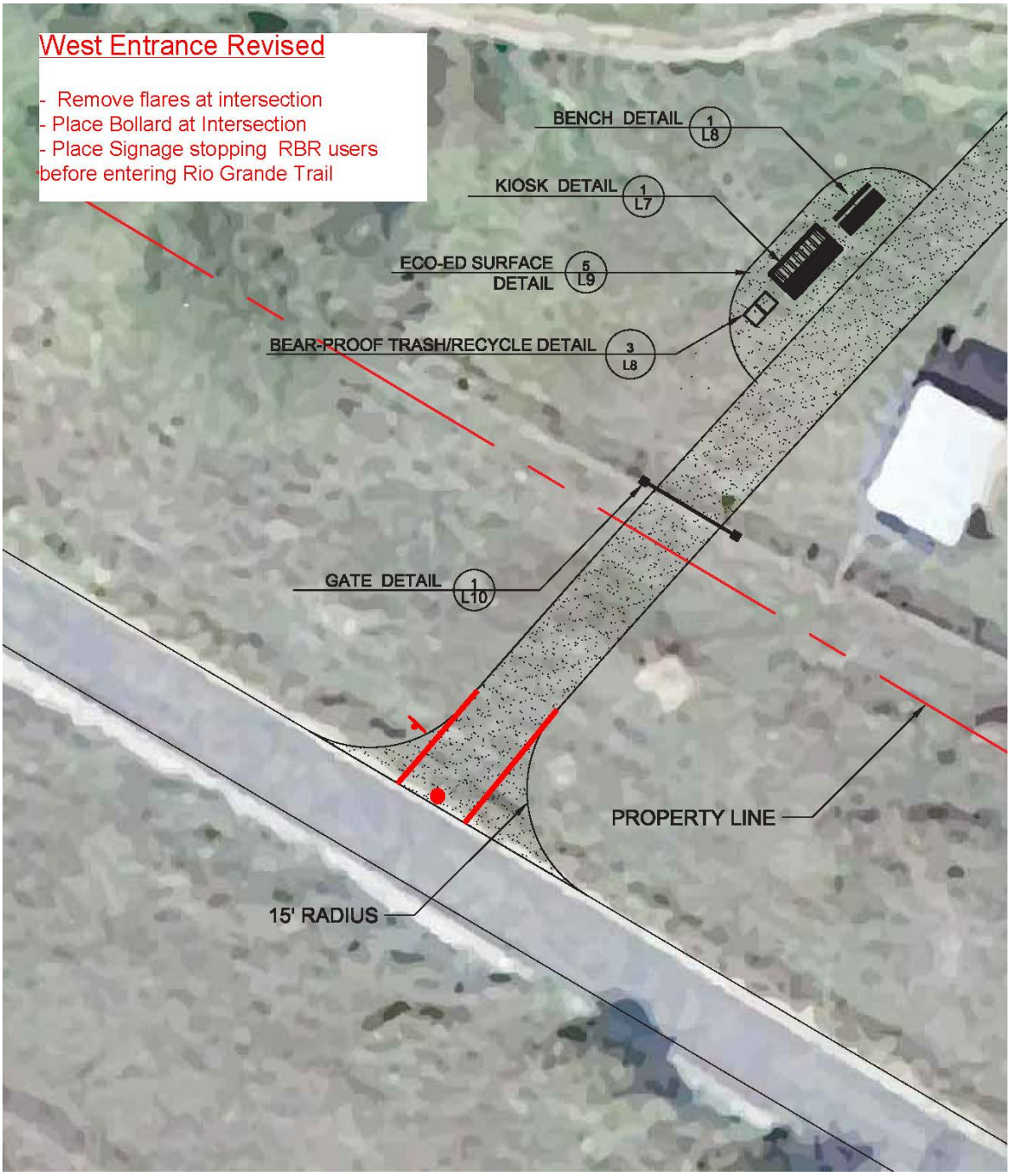
As a part of operating and maintain the intersections, ACES will cut back existing ground vegetation periodically to insure adequate sight distance. ACES will work with RFTA staff when conducting these mowing operations.

The originally proposed interaction design is a simple, perpendicular "T" intersection. Based on meetings with RFTA staff in the field, we have modified the T-intersections to be safer as follows:

- The flares (15-foot radius) at the connection of the Eco-trail with the Rio Grande Trail have been removed;
- A bollard will be placed at the intersection to require negotiation of the turning movements at slower speeds;
- After leaving RFTA property, the west portal trail will be serpentine to keep bikes at a slow speed and to help in climbing the existing grade;
- A sign will be placed that requests users of the Eco-trail to dismount and look both ways before entering the Rio Grande Trail:

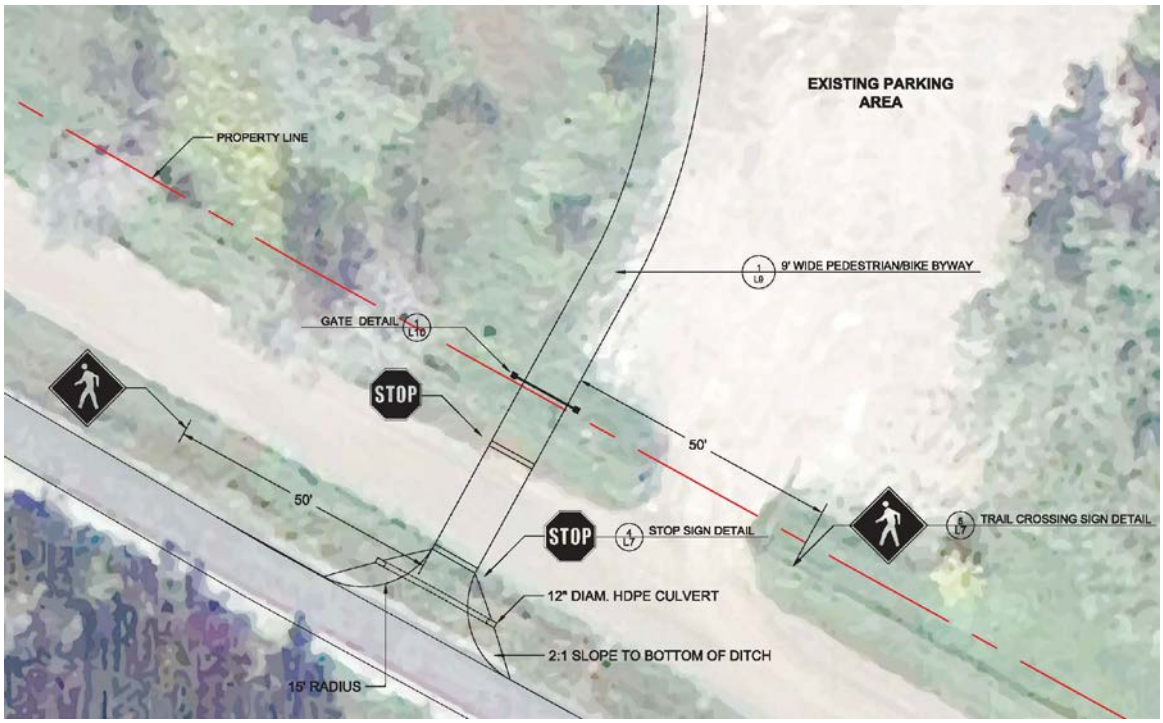
Original Intersection Plan (West Entrance):

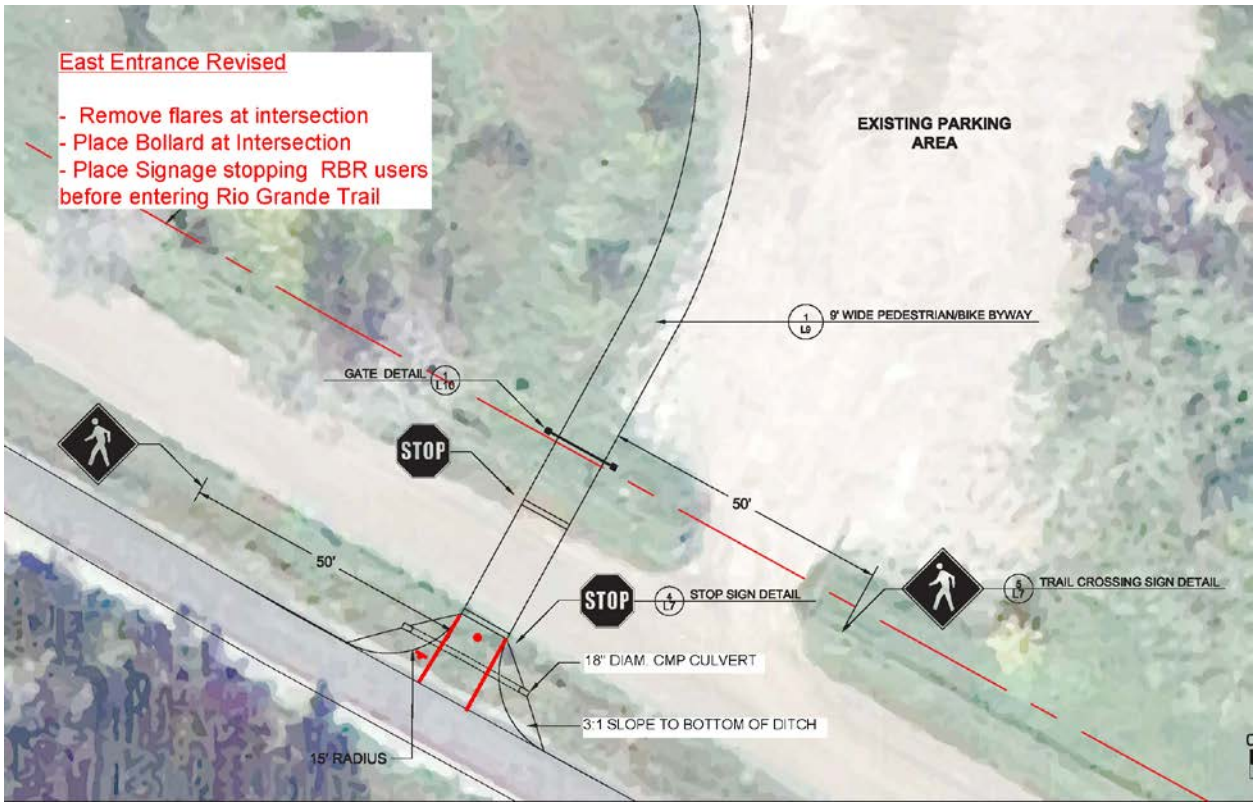




We feel that the bollard and signage placed at the entrance will make bikers and pedestrians stop and look both ways before entering the Rio Grande Trail from Rock Bottom Ranch.

Original Intersection Plan (East Entrance):





To summarize, ACES is looking forward to working with RFTA to provide quality learning and play experience for users of the Rio Grande trail that's easy to use and safe for everyone. We feel that the Eco-Trail connections as revised are complainant with RFTA policies and standards, comply with the goals of the Access Control Plan and provide safe and user-friendly trail connections. I hope that the Board of Directors will agree that the Eco-trail as designed is compatible with the operation of RFTA's regional trail system and that the licenses for both intersections should be approved.