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Barry O'Melinn, front, and Jesse Raether, back, mountain bike on the newly opened Challenge Trail extension in the Sandia Mountains on Friday.

Challenges ahead

New trail opens in the Sandia Mountains

BY RYAN BOETEL
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There's a new challenge in the Sandia Mountains.

The Cibola National Forest recently held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the newly revamped Challenge Trail, which winds through the upper reaches of the Sandias. The new extension takes users from the Doc Long Picnic Area to the Sandia Peak Ski Area.

The original Challenge Trail went from the Ellis Trailhead to the Sandia Peak Ski Area. The trail roughly followed N.M. Highway 536.

"This extension then extends (the Challenge Trail) from the base of the downhill ski area down to Bill's Spring Trail," said Sam Beard, a projects coordinator for



Flowers on side of the newly opened Challenge Trail extension in the Sandia Mountains.



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The Challenge Trail extension in the Sandia Mountains.

TRAIL >>

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Friends of the Sandia Mountains.

Construction on the trail started in the spring of 2021. The work wrapped up in mid-August and the trail opened to the public, Christopher Nichols, the forest recreation program manager, said in an email. About 100 volunteers from Friends of the Sandia Mountains and the Albuquerque Mountain Bike Association worked on the project, Nichols said.

The trail's sign is new, there are markings on the trees and the dirt single-track still looks manicured.

Nichols said the volunteers "were pivotal in the completion of this project."

He said the Challenge Trail was the only active construction project being done in the Sandias, though visitors may see ongoing maintenance work on various trails.

The Sandia Mountains are the most-visited mountains in New Mexico, according to the Forest Service.

"The trails on the San-



Flowers bask in the sun on the newly opened Challenge Trail extension in the Sandia Mountains on Friday.

dia Ranger District have high visitation from both our local community and visitors to the area. Providing new opportunities for trail-goers, like the addition of the Challenge Trail extension, will create additional loop opportunities which will allow visitors to tailor trips based on their desired time on the trail, skills, and destinations they wish to seek," Nichols said.

"This gives visitors the ability to craft their adventure but also intends to disperse recreators across the landscape."

The lowest terminus of the Challenge Trail is now

at the end of Bill Springs Trail. The trailhead is about ¼-mile from the Doc Long Picnic area.

Beard said the original Challenge Trail was designed to be a cross-country ski trail, and it is marked with blue diamonds nailed to trees so the trail can be followed in the winter. The new addition was designed the same way.

It's also easy to stay on the trail, with steep canyon walls on both sides of the trail that reach up to the highway.

The trail is another long hike with a lot of climbing in the Sandia Mountains. The full trail is about 10 miles with 3,300 feet of elevation gain, Beard said.

"It's just another challenging trail," he said.

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