

# COMMUNITY FEEDBACK REPORT



## SURVEY RESULTS

# Free Roaming Horses of Placitas – Community Input

This online public input survey was commissioned by Sandoval County, with data collected by New Mexico First.



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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
Purpose of this Report.....	iii
About New Mexico First .....	iii
About Sandoval County .....	iii
Report Authors .....	iii
<b>Survey Results</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Method .....	4
Question 1: Residence.....	4
Question 2: Support for the Establishment of a Multidisciplinary Board .....	5
Question 3: Support for a Horse-Specific Placitas Assessment.....	5
<b>Community Comments</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Big Picture.....	6
Multi-Jurisdictional Board .....	6
Assessment.....	6
Problems Identified .....	6
Solutions.....	7
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Appendix A</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Feedback from People Outside Placitas .....	8

# Foreword

## **Purpose of this Report**

In 2014, Sandoval County commissioned a task force administered by New Mexico First to gather solutions for the humane treatment of free-roaming horses in Placitas. The effort addressed the sustainability of the environment as well as potential actions for residents, neighborhoods, and government agencies.

The task force developed a report that offered a sound mix of potential next steps, some of which took place. However, community members and county leaders agree there is still much to do, and herd sizes have continued to grow. One potential solution is to establish a multi-jurisdictional board to help manage horse-related plans. In fall 2018, the county invited the public to take a community input survey to assess support for the concept and how to finance it.

This report synthesizes those results.

## **About New Mexico First**

A statewide public policy organization, New Mexico First engages people in critical issues facing their state and communities. The nonpartisan, nonprofit group produces comprehensive policy reports – primarily on natural resources, education, health, good government and the economy. These analyses inform policy discussions, legislative options, or local decision-making. These documents also provide the foundation for New Mexico First’s unique town halls and forums that convene citizens to develop proposals to improve the state. The reports are available at [nmfirst.org](http://nmfirst.org). Our state’s two U.S. Senators – Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich – serve as New Mexico First’s honorary co-chairs. The organization was co-founded in 1986 by former U.S. Senator Jeff Bingaman and the late Senator Pete Domenici.

## **About Sandoval County**

Sandoval County is one of the most geographically and culturally diverse areas in the nation. The languages and traditions represented in the county are as varied as the music and dance of its collective cultures. Sandoval County government provides a wide range of services, agencies, and programs that seek to benefit residents. The county believes that the key to its future is remaining united by the atmosphere of optimism that has drawn people to this area for thousands of years.

## **Report Authors**

This New Mexico First report was prepared by staff members Heather Balas and Melanie Sanchez Eastwood, with support by Gabrielle Ontiveros.

# Survey Results

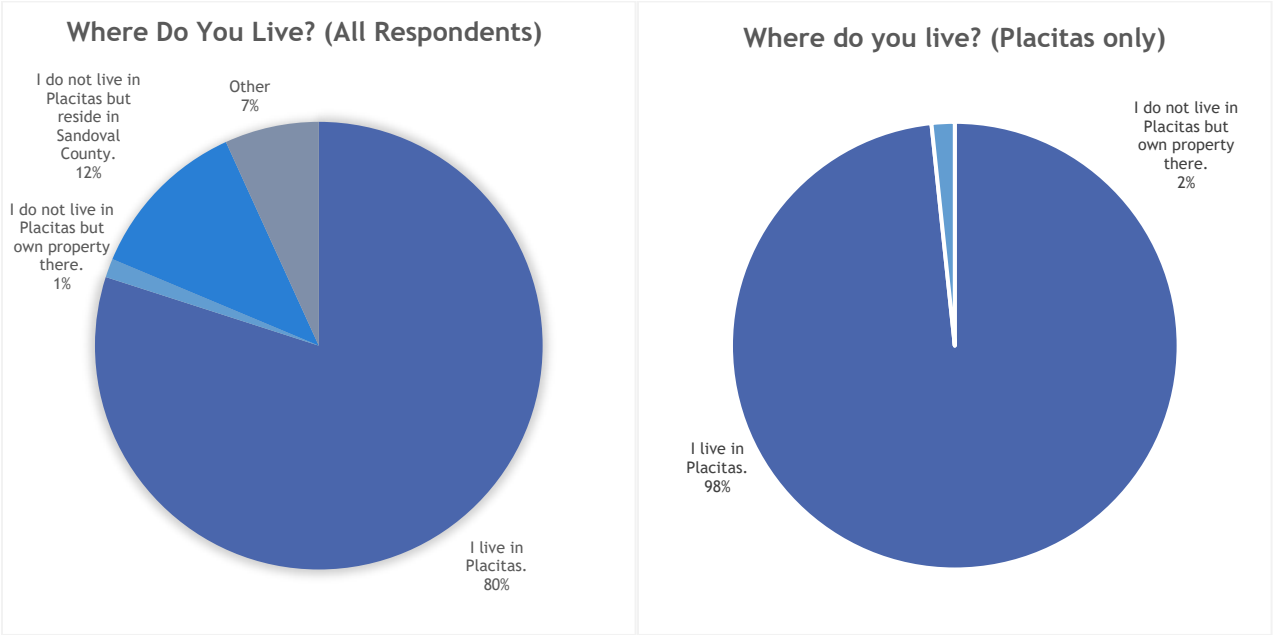
## Method

The community feedback survey on the free roaming horses of Placitas opened September 4 and closed October 15, 2018. Sandoval County developed the questions and New Mexico First collected the public input. People were invited to participate in the survey via Sandoval County’s website, email outreach by New Mexico First, traditional media coverage, County Commission hearings, and social media. This was an “opt-in” survey; no claims are made that these results represent a statistical sample of Placitas residents. The respondents took part voluntarily, based on their interest in the subject. A total of 514 responded to the survey, of whom 418 were Placitas residents or property owners.<sup>1</sup>

The county asked respondents whether they favored the establishment of a multidisciplinary board, and if they approved of a horse-specific financial assessment to pay for activities identified by the board.

## Question 1: Residence

Where do you live?

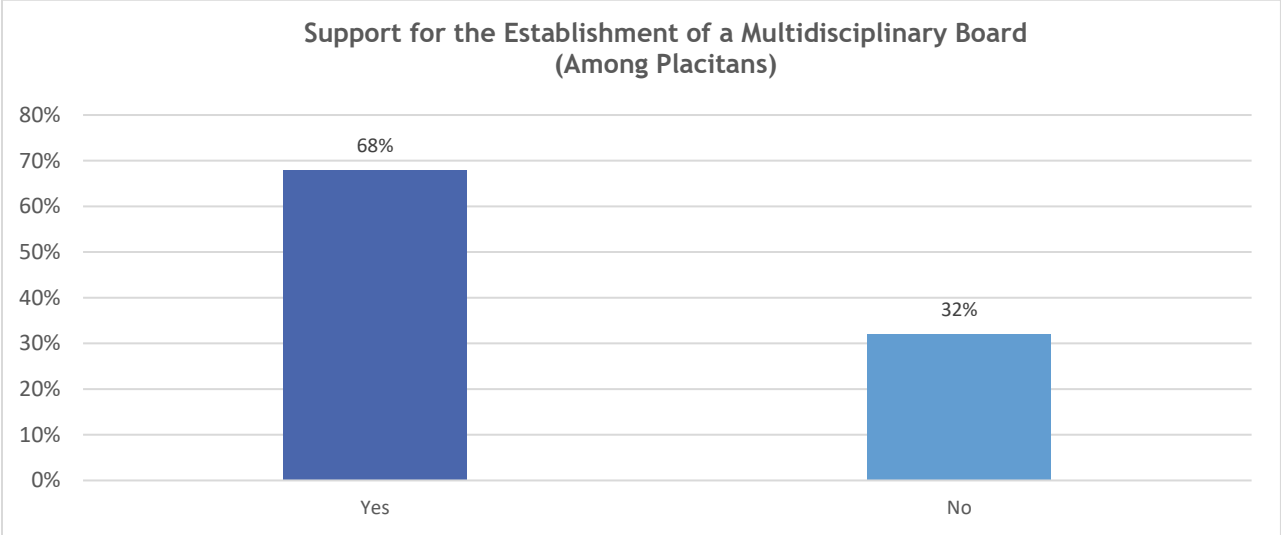


Care and management of the free-roaming horses of Placitas are fundamentally community matters, so this report prioritizes survey responses from those who live or own land in Placitas. **Subsequent charts and comments present responses from Placitas people only.** (Data from respondents outside Placitas are separated and reported in the appendix.)

<sup>1</sup> Placitas residents provided their addresses, a randomized 75-person sample of which underwent verification against county property owner rolls and online sources. In the sample, all but three were confirmed to be Placitas residents. The unconfirmed people may also be Placitans, but whose addresses are registered under different last names due to marriage, rentals, recent sales or other reasons. This activity was performed to make a best effort to generally verify that the survey responses came from members of the Placitas community.

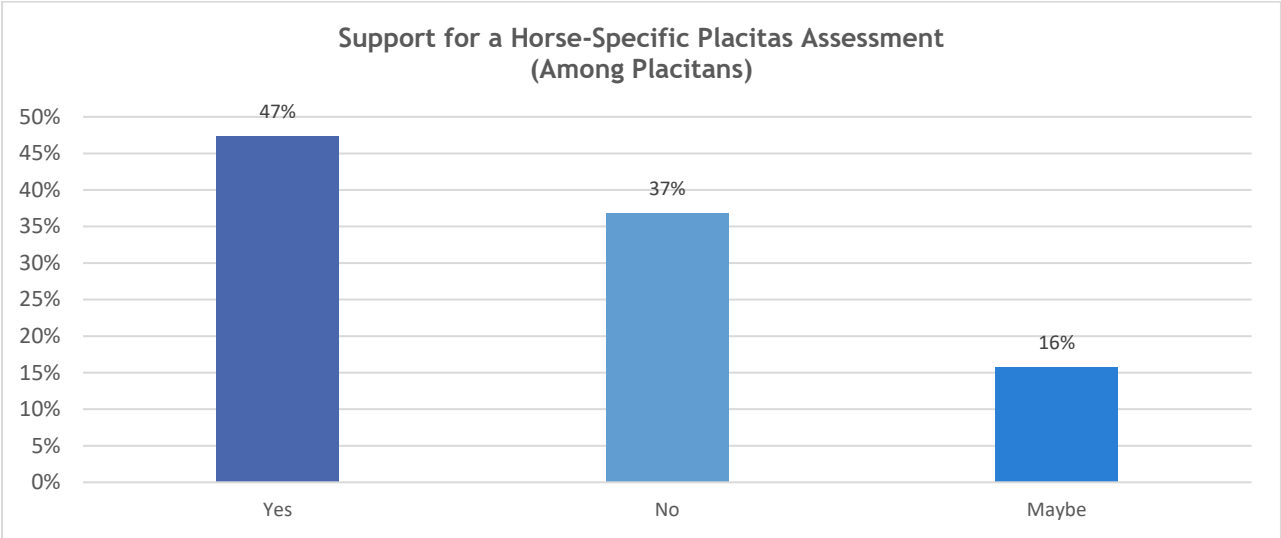
**Question 2: Support for the Establishment of a Multidisciplinary Board**

Would you support the establishment of a multidisciplinary board comprised of community members and government officials to develop a comprehensive, long-term plan to address the issue of free-roaming horses in Placitas? The board would have bylaws, follow the Open Meetings Act, and serve as the oversight body for devised plans.



**Question 3: Support for a Horse-Specific Placitas Assessment**

Since costs will be associated with solutions, would you support a horse-specific Placitas Assessment? (For homeowners, this annual assessment would not exceed \$100, and for property owners who own only land, it would not exceed \$50.) These funds would be placed into a segregated account with the county, which would serve as fiscal agent to the multidisciplinary board. The board members themselves would not be paid; instead the funds from this assessment would support solutions for the horses such as contraception, land and/or operations of a sanctuary, fencing or other devised plans from the board.



# Community Comments

The survey included three opportunities to offer comments, all of which ultimately offered similar inputs. The comments were analyzed together and fell into several general categories.

## Big Picture

In terms of general sentiment about the horses, comments fell in three main groupings:

- Whatever solutions are chosen, do not harm or remove the animals
- Remove the horses, either entirely or through a significant reduction in number
- Leave the horses alone, with this group including a combination of the people above (i.e., some people said leave the horses alone because they fear human intervention will harm them; others said leave them alone without supplemental food or water because they want the herd to naturally become smaller)

It is worth noting that, among those who offered comments, considerably more people seemed to favor protecting the horses than removing them.

## Multi-Jurisdictional Board

People asked many questions about the make-up of the board, some answering “maybe” to Question 2 pending details on how the seats would be filled. Some people favored populating the board with all community members with no government entities, even those government entities that control the land on which the animals graze. Others favored government involvement. Still others simply wanted mechanisms for community input in the board’s decisions.

## Assessment

As noted above, almost half of survey respondents indicated they would support an assessment for home and property owners in Placitas to finance solutions to manage the free-roaming horses. Among people who answered “no” or “maybe,” comments generally addressed the following matters:

- Ensuring the funds are used only for the horses and could not be diverted for any other county or state purposes
- The amount of the fee; some considered it too high
- Whether the fee could be voluntary, temporary, or perhaps just a one-time donation
- Whether the fee could be directed to specific types of people (i.e., taxing those who want the horses or sparing those who do not live near the horses’ roaming areas)

## Problems Identified

Several Placitas community members used the survey to share their frustrations about the free-roaming horses, with the two concerns outweighing all others by far:

- Roadway safety, for both people and horses
- Damage to range and native grasslands caused by overgrazing by the horses

Some Placitas community members expressed significant resentment toward horse-owners who “dumped” their animals in the area. This issue led some people to recommend solutions such as auctions or adoptions for horses that had been abandoned. Other people focused on perceived needs for more engagement by tribal neighbors. People also voiced concerns about a culture of distrust and animosity among neighbors. Some community members even declined to share their contact information on the survey, fearing retaliation within the village for taking part in this process.

## Solutions

Survey respondents offered multiple ideas, which could inform future work by the potential multi-jurisdictional board or other community groups. Many of the solutions echoed those offered in the 2014 task force report presented to the Sandoval County Commission at that time and again in September 2018.

Frequently mentioned solutions included:

- Deploy contraception (*most frequent suggestion by far*)
- Stop feeding and watering the horses, especially near populated areas
- Use rangeland science to determine the number of horses the land can support and reduce the herd size accordingly
- Invest in one or more sanctuaries, with some people urging an eco-tourism approach where people could pay to observe the horses from a distance
- Relocate the animals, some people specifying that destinations should be safe for the horses
- Tap the expertise of private organizations in the community (some people say *instead of* the multi-jurisdictional board, others say *in conjunction* with the board)
- Invest in more fencing, especially near roadway
- Change driver behavior and further reduce speed limits

Occasionally and rarely mentioned solutions included:

- Adoption of the horses to safe homes
- Auctions or private sales
- Drilling one remote well far north of the village, providing emergency water for horses without human engagement
- Sterilization
- Euthanasia

Solutions were mixed regarding the roles of government entities and contractors:

- *Sandoval County*: Some people thanked the county for its efforts and for issuing the survey; others wanted the county to do more to manage the horses including financing their upkeep. Still others did not want the county to manage a board or take action on what they saw as a community matter.
- *New Mexico First*: Similarly, some people expressed thanks for the efforts so far. A small number of comments urged that future contracts be directed instead to community organizations.
- *New Mexico Livestock Board*: Multiple comments called for increased engagement and cooperation with the NMLB; others strongly opposed any participation from the NMLB.
- *Bureau of Land Management*: Similarly, some comments urged cooperation with BLM since it controls significant areas of land where the horses roam; others opposed participation by the agency.

## Conclusion

One thing is clear. The community of Placitas remains divided about how to manage the free-roaming horses. Whether or not the county's proposal for a new multi-jurisdictional board goes forward, it appears that many people in Placitas want action taken and most options would require at least some financial resources. How these needs will be met remains to be seen. The Sandoval County Commission will determine next steps in this process.



# Appendix A

## Feedback from People Outside Placitas

People throughout Sandoval County and other areas also offered their opinions. Responses included community members from Sandia Park, Rio Rancho, Pena Blanca, Jemez Springs, Jemez Pueblo, Corrales, Bernalillo and Algodones. Their input was not included in the charts on the previous pages.

Question	Yes	No	Maybe
Support Multidisciplinary Board	89%	11%	
Support Placitas Assessment	81%	11%	8%

Location	Yes
Sandoval County	64%
Other	36%

