

Efforts speed up to calm San Francisquito Creek

Creek authority looks to Palo Alto golf course, Stanford for flood-control help

by Gennady Sheyner

The solution to the flooding problems around San Francisquito Creek may lie in an upstream retention basin, a downstream levy or a widened channel next to Palo Alto's golf course.

Or, it could entail turning the clock back by 80 years and letting nature take its course.

The San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority (SFCJPA), an agency composed of officials from cities and counties surrounding the creek, has been winnowing down its options for flood-control projects over the past few months. Last week, the authority hired a consultant to explore the upstream area for possible water-detention sites and analyze possible projects downstream of U.S. Highway 101, near the Palo Alto Baylands.

The authority also learned last week that it would likely get \$335,000 in federal funds for a comprehensive study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which would be \$335,000 more than the Corps received last year for the stagnated study. The U.S. House of Representatives has already passed the spending bill containing the funding allocation and the U.S. Senate is expected to act on the bill soon.

The authority also requested \$700,000 for the Army Corps study from next year's federal budget.

But even with possible federal money on the horizon, agency of-

officials agree it's too early to celebrate. The normally dry creek, which stretches from the Santa Cruz Mountains to the Baylands and forms a border between Palo Alto and East Palo Alto, has a notorious volatility during heavy downpours. In 1998, a heavy storm forced water to spill over the creek's banks and wash over sections of East Palo Alto and the Crescent Park neighborhood in Palo Alto, causing about \$28 million in damage.

City officials warn that another torrent could cost lives, particularly in downstream areas in East Palo Alto.

"It could be devastating," said Palo Alto Mayor Peter Drekmeier, member of the SFCJPA board of directors. "It really could be a mini-Katrina."

To ward off a potential disaster, JPA members have been putting together "early implementation" plans — smaller-scale projects that could be implemented while the Corps works on its study.

That's where the consultant comes in.

The San Francisco-based firm Philip Williams and Associates was hired to explore upstream areas in and around Stanford land and identify potential sites for detention basins.

"The more we can detail upstream, the less onerous will be the solution downstream," he said.

The firm will also analyze three

downstream alternatives: widening the channel near the Baylands, creating a secondary channel through the Palo Alto Municipal Golf Course, and removing a levee between the creek and the Baylands. The removal of the levee would bring the San Francisquito closer to what it looked like before 1930s.

"It would open the creek to the Baylands and let nature decide what the creek should look like as it enters the bay," Materman said.

Materman expects the agency to make a decision on early implementation projects this summer.

An upstream solution would likely require approval from Stanford University.

Drekmeier praised Materman's efforts to spread awareness about the creek's destructive potential and accelerate the flood-control projects. In the coming months, Materman will be holding a series of meetings in cities around the creek.

Next Thursday, he will discuss the creek projects at a community meeting in Palo Alto City Hall. The meeting will begin at 7 p.m.

"My goal is moving forward as quickly and as wisely as we can on decision-making and moving into the environmental process and design process," Materman said. ■

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