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## Officials unveil first phase of San Francisquito Creek flood protection

More than 1,000 homes are now safe from a 100-year flood event



Rock and an expanded flood plain will spread the floodwater from San Francisquito Creek and carry it to San Francisco Bay during major storms, helping to eliminate floods upstream and in East Palo Alto's Gardens neighborhood.

by Sue Dremann / Palo Alto Weekly



Homes in East Palo Alto about the Faber Marsh where water fowl swim. The neighborhood was once threatened by flooding and is now protected due to the efforts of the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority.

Photos by Sue Dremann.

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Under dark clouds and an eventual downpour, public officials on Friday unveiled the completed first phase of a San Francisquito Creek project that aims to protect 1,000 homes from a 100-year flood event during an extreme high tide.

The \$76 million Phase 1 project is also designed to protect East Palo Alto homes against sea-level rise that could be 10 feet higher than today, officials said.

The end of the first phase caps more than 60 years of debate to finally address dangerous flooding along the creek, which has been exacerbated by upstream development that eliminated permeable ground that absorbed rainwater and the construction of homes and businesses in the flood plain.

Officials created the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority -- a five-member coalition including representatives from the cities of Menlo Park, East Palo Alto and Palo Alto, the San Mateo County Flood Control District and the Santa Clara Valley Water District -- to fix flooding after storms in [February 1998](#) caused the creek to overflow. The floods affected 1,700 homes and businesses in the three cities and caused more than \$28 million in damage. The JPA's ultimate goal is to protect more than 5,700 homes and businesses in East Palo Alto, Palo Alto and Menlo Park.

Phase 1 of the project covered the creek and surrounding flood plain from San Francisco Bay to U.S. Highway 101. The improvements include a widened creek channel in East Palo Alto and at the Palo Alto Municipal Golf Course, which will help move water faster to the bay and prevent backups; a horizontal levee that is adaptable to sea-level rise; and enhanced habitat and environmental improvements for wildlife and endangered species.

The project has also improved connections for pedestrians and bicyclists between the creek and adjacent marsh by adding a boardwalk at the Friendship Bridge between East Palo Alto and Palo Alto as well as improving trail access. The project will add thousands of new plants for wildlife.

The first phase restored a total of 22 acres of marsh. The Palo Alto golf course had the biggest gain in native habitat. Twelve acres of golf course land were used for widening the creek flood plain, JPA Executive Director Len Materman said.

The massive undertaking involved Pacific Gas & Electric relocating a gas pipeline and cooperation with state and federal agencies to receive permits and protect the habitat for the federally protected salt marsh harvest mouse and Ridgway's rail. The California Department of Transportation also added another culvert and improvements to alleviate a constriction under Highway 101 during the highway bridge replacement on both East and West Bayshore roads.

On Friday, as the storm clouds gathered, flocks of mud hens pecked in the shallows and the widened flood plain looking for insects while geese and ducks trawled the waters of the Faber Marsh. The rooflines of dozens of homes, which back up to the marshlands, still sit below the levee, a reminder of the times when the creek overflowed in major storms and the neighborhood flooded, putting lives at risk.

In [December 2012](#), the creek again overflowed and damaged the protective mud levees, prompting then-East Palo Alto Mayor Ruben Abrica to seek and receive an [emergency declaration](#) and funding from Gov. Jerry Brown for temporary repairs.

But now the homes, including that of current East Palo Alto Mayor Lisa Gauthier, are safe, said Gary Kremen, Joint Powers chair and director at the Santa Clara Valley Water District. The JPA is now looking to the second project phase, upstream of Highway 101, which would include areas in Palo Alto that flooded in 1998. That event alone affected 11,000 homes and caused 1,000 people to be evacuated in East Palo Alto, Palo Alto and Menlo Park, he noted.

Gauthier noted that, during one of the flood events that affected her street, she had put on her rain boots before venturing out. As she waded through the rising water, she wondered if she was going to need higher boots, she said. The dangers for East Palo Alto were particularly great because there are so many seniors living in the community, she said.

Abrica recalled that in 1998, when he was on the Ravenswood City School District Board of Education, he called out district school buses to help transport residents from the evacuated area.

Dennis Parker and his wife, East Palo Alto flood victims, lost everything in two floods from the creek, in 1955 and 1998.

"We feel safe for the first time since 1998," he said.

Materman said the project will protect more than homes and property. The creek flooding also endangers and damages open spaces, local parks and the golf course.

"You can be assured this creek will not threaten the spaces that you love," he said.

Concerns about the volatile and unpredictable creek and the effort to repair it have spanned more than six decades. After the 1955 flood, the Palo Alto City Council discussed working collaboratively with other jurisdictions, Kremen noted. But there was little forward movement until after 1998.

Receiving proper permitting from federal agencies concerned with wetland and endangered-species protections proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the project, officials said.

U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier, who attended Friday's event, said she fought hard to get the permits so the project could move forward.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was to receive \$7 million for a feasibility study, but then-President George W. Bush's administration [did not include](#) the money in the federal budget, necessitating a local effort to fund the project.

"You notice that no federal money went into this project. If that was the case, we'd still be debating this," Speier said, lauding the power of local and regional collaboration.

Palo Alto Mayor Liz Kniss said the 1998 flood was a wake-up call. Kniss, a city councilwoman at the time, recalled that night when the council meeting ran very late. As the rain outside poured down, water began to drip inside the council chambers, she recalled.

"There was no early-warning system," she said.

It wasn't until the next morning on her way to work that the full impact of the flooding was apparent, she said. Kniss did not live in a section of town that was flooded, but she realized the city had experienced something significant when she could not cross the highway.

"I don't know how many lawsuits we had accusing us of not being prepared," she said.

During the ceremony on Friday, at about 11:30 a.m., the skies opened up and the rain began to pour as a squall blew across the new levees. State Sen. Jerry Hill, D-San Mateo, said it was fitting that the weather would turn rainy on the day of the project's unveiling.

"Let it rain. Let it rain. Let it rain," he said.

Materman said plans for the [upstream phase](#), which includes decisions to be made regarding Palo Alto's narrow Chaucer Bridge, are underway. The JPA expects to release a public Draft Environmental Impact Report by the end of February that will be available for public comment. The JPA is working on a funding package and will also apply for permits. If all goes well, the project construction could begin in 2020, he said.

While the first phase had problems obtaining permits, Materman said he is hopeful that the one-and-a-half years of working with regulatory agencies will bear fruit and allow the upstream project to go through more quickly.

Palo Alto is managing a separate environmental review for a replacement of the Newell Road Bridge, another choke point for San Francisquito Creek. The Draft EIR for that project is also scheduled to be released early next year.