

San Francisquito Creek project to surge ahead next year

Long-stalled flood-control plans include new levees, protection for wildlife

by Gennady Sheyner

When flood-control officials finally break ground next year on a long-awaited effort to calm the flood-prone San Francisquito Creek, it won't be just the human residents around the creek whom they'll be looking to protect.

The downstream area that's targeted for construction, between the Baylands and U.S. Highway 101, is home to a rich array of wildlife, including the California clapper rail, the white-tailed kite and the double-crested cormorant. The salt marsh harvest mouse, an endangered species, makes its home in the Baylands and the salt marsh wandering shrew has been known to wander in this area as well. California red-legged frogs have also been observed several miles from the construction area, as have western pond turtles.

The regional strategy for protecting these species from construction is detailed in the newly released environmental impact report (EIR), a state-mandated document that analyzes the expected impacts of the ambitious project and proposes strategies for minimizing the problems.

The effort is being spearheaded by the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority, which consists of officials from Palo Alto, East Palo Alto, Menlo Park, the Santa Clara Valley Water District and the San Mateo County Flood Protection District. The overarching goal is to protect the partner cities from the dreaded 100-year flood, which by definition has a 1 percent chance of happening in any given year. The major project targets the particularly flood-prone area downstream, which suffered millions of dollars in damages in a February 1998 flood. To calm the floodwater in this area, the creek authority plans to knock down an old, largely degraded levee to allow floodwater from the creek to enter the Baylands. New levees would then be constructed to widen the channel, and floodwalls would be added along East

Bayshore Road.

On a parallel track, the agency is also looking to upgrade several bridges over the creek — starting with the Newell Road bridge between Palo Alto and East Palo Alto — and explore possible options for retaining flood water in the upstream area in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

While the primary goal of the downstream project detailed in the new environmental analysis is to calm the creek, officials from the partner cities also hope to use this opportunity to enhance the area's natural habitat and recreational uses. The destruction of the old levee, for example, would create new marshlands, while the reconstruction of the Palo Alto Municipal Golf Course would make space available for three athletic fields, an amenity that Palo Alto officials enthusiastically endorsed last month.

But as the new report makes clear, the project comes with plenty of challenges, including the task of ensuring that construction won't harm or displace members of the rich and delicate Baylands ecosystem. The creek authority is proposing a wide array of measures to protect the area's biological resources. These include installing "nesting exclusion devices" to prevent birds from setting up nests in construction zones, planting native vegetation species and conducting extensive surveys of nesting raptors, migratory birds, burrowing owls and other species just prior to construction. The agency would then establish buffer zones and, if necessary, delay or relocate portions of the project as needed to accommodate the wildlife.

The creek authority plans to begin relocating utility equipment in December and to start work on the levees in January. Much of the levee excavation and construction is pegged for next summer. The authority plans to start constructing floodwalls in May 2014 and to



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The area adjacent to the San Francisquito Creek is slated for a flood-reduction and ecosystem-restoration project.

have the project largely completed by the end of that year.

These deadlines could slip, however, if the wildlife doesn't cooperate. The environmental report notes, for example, that if a biologist identifies a nesting burrowing owl in an area that would be affected by construction, a 250-foot "no-

activity buffer" would be established and remain in place while the nest is active. Similarly, if a California clapper rail or a California black rail sets up nests near the construction area, project activities "will be postponed until after the young have fledged." And if a salt marsh harvest mouse or a salt marsh wandering shrew is observed while workers are clearing pickleweeds, "clearing will cease and workers will move to a new area."

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The new report also dedicates a section to protection of the steelhead trout, another prominent member of the Baylands ecosystem. The authority plans to avoid in-channel construction between early October and the end of April, the steelhead migration period, and to have a fisheries biologist survey construction areas for surface water before construction commences. Before an area is dewatered, the report states, "fish will be captured and relocated to avoid injury and mortality and minimize disturbance."

The new environmental analysis acknowledges that the project will have other unwanted impacts, some of which cannot be mitigated. This includes pollution from construction, which is expected to exceed the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's threshold for significance. The level of nitrogen oxide, the report notes,

will have other unwanted impacts, some of which cannot be mitigated. This includes pollution from construction, which is expected to exceed the Bay Area Air Quality Management District's threshold for significance. The level of nitrogen oxide, the report notes,

would remain "significant and unavoidable" by state standards. But in the creek authority's view, this short-term spike in air pollution is a reasonable price to pay for long-term flood protection.

The authority's "judgment is that the flood control benefits to residents in East Palo Alto and Palo Alto outweighs the temporary significant and unavoidable NOx emissions during project constructions," the environmental report states. Another impact that cannot be avoided is disruption to Palo Alto's golf course, the environmental report notes. In this case, however, the city has its own plan for addressing this significant recreation impact. On July 23, the City Council unanimously approved a \$7.5 million plan for redesigning the golf course to align it with the proposed levee configuration. The project would get about \$3 million in funding from the creek authority. Palo Alto would foot the rest of the bill, with the city's share coming from playing fees at the

golf course.

The project detailed in the new report is a major step forward for a flood-control effort that languished under inadequate funding for more than a decade before generating momentum in the past three years. It also signifies the fresh approach toward flood control that the creek authority adopted under Len Materman, who became the agency's executive director in 2008. Previously, officials from the three cities and the two water districts had pinned their hopes on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineering, which had been conducting its own study for protecting the area from floods. But with the federal study underfunded and making imperceptible progress, the creek authority elected to pursue its own smaller-scale projects targeting specific portions of the watershed.

The downstream project has already received the backing of all five members of the creek authority. In Palo Alto, residents in the Crescent Park and Duveneck/St. Francis neighborhoods near the creek have been particularly adamant over the years about the need to boost flood protection.

The release of the Environmental Impact Report triggers a 45-day review period during which people can submit comments and questions, which the creek authority must address. The review period concludes on Sept. 13. The report is available at www.sfcjpa.org.

The authority also plans to hold public hearings on the project at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Aug. 15, and Wednesday, Aug. 29, on the first floor of the East Palo Alto City Hall. ■

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Along with the salt marsh harvest mouse, California red-legged frog, white-tailed kite and double-crested cormorant, this Snowy Egret makes its home in the Palo Alto Baylands Nature Preserve.