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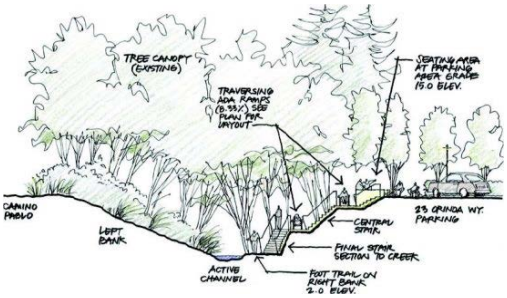
Expert discusses restoring streams in difficult urban locations

By Sora O'Doherty



If there is one thing that Orindans seem to agree would be a positive step in the development of downtown, it is the daylighting of San Pablo Creek. It is also generally acknowledged that doing so will be a challenging process. That is why the Friends of Orinda Creeks invited an expert on exactly that process to speak at their October meeting.

Ann Riley, Ph.D., is the executive director of the nonprofit Waterways Restoration Institute (WRI), and watershed and river restoration advisor for the San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board. During her 12-year tenure with WRI, she has organized, planned, designed, constructed, and funded numerous stream-restoration projects in California and throughout the United States, and over four decades she has been involved with community-level nonprofits, as well as local, state and federal agencies in watershed planning, water quality, water conservation, hydrology, flood management, stream science and restoration. She has served on committees for the National Academy of Sciences and the John Heinz Center for Science, Economics, and the Environment.

In 1982 Riley cofounded the Urban Creeks Council in California and in 1993 was instrumental in organizing the first conference of the Coalition to Restore Urban Waters, a national network of urban stream and river organizations. In 1984 she spearheaded a program under the auspices of the California Department of Water Resources that continues today to provide grants supporting urban stream restoration. She is the author of "Restoring Streams in Cities" and "Restoring Neighborhood Streams," both published by Island Press.

While many think that restoring San Pablo Creek is a daunting task, Riley thinks it is a piece of cake. She showed how creeks in difficult urban landscapes have been successfully restored. Two areas of particular note in her talk were the Albany University Village and the restoration of Napa Creek. In the Napa creek project, seven to nine homes beside the creek that were constantly flooding were relocated. Following its restoration, the creek is now home to beavers and other wildlife. In Martinez you can also find beavers in the restored creek, plus steelhead, herons, pond turtles and otters. She also talked about bringing the use of ancient technology that has been forgotten but is enjoying a comeback, such as soil bioengineering to stabilize creek banks.

Funding the Napa project required a sales tax that had to be passed by a two-thirds vote. But Riley pointed out this led to participation and "buy in" that really meant a lot to the project. Riley talked about other funding possibilities, and noted that there will be a bond for parks and water projects during the next election. Codornices Creek in Albany/Berkeley was restored with grants from the state of California. El Cerrito, she noted, made it a development condition for a new shopping center that the developer daylight the creek.

In Orinda, she said, what needs to be done is to provide a new slope for the creek and to control flooding by design, and added that there needs to be a community discussion about how many parking spaces can be traded off for creek restoration and business rejuvenation. Riley concluded her talk with a wish list for San Pablo Creek, which included bringing the creek up to the level of the stores, providing more outdoor seating, trails and a pocket park. Riley thinks that the Urban Land Institute report, which was presented Sept. 20 to the city of Orinda, is of great value and that there are a lot of creative things that can be done with San Pablo Creek. She recommends that there be a subcommittee on creek restoration, and that a team of landscape architects be consulted.

A beaver lives in the restored Napa Creek Photo provided

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