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## Additional work to be undertaken on San Pablo Creek restoration

By Sora O'Doherty

Orinda will spend an additional \$59,000 on further studies of conditions affecting San Pablo Creek. In fact, the additional work will actually cost the city only \$27,000, as the project is currently under budget, according to Orinda Planning Director Drummond Buckley. The additional amount needed, about \$27,000, can come from the long range planning fund, Buckley said.

Buckley returned to the Orinda City Council on May 18 to respond to questions that arose at the council's March 16 meeting. He explained that Placeworks proposes a more technical focus on the creek, which Buckley said has been neglected for a long time. The creek, which is an essential component of the city's stormwater drainage system, was rerouted in the 1940s and '50s, after which it was completely ignored. Orinda has never put any money toward the issue of the creek since the city was incorporated in 1985, Buckley added.

He gave the council a presentation aimed at explaining why the additional expenditures on the creek are now required. San Pablo Creek is a potential natural amenity, as well as a pedestrian and/or bicycle corridor. He pointed out that other communities have capitalized on creeks in their commercial areas, and that there is a lot of community support for restoring San Pablo Creek, which is currently undergrounded as it passes through downtown Orinda.

The planning director talked about the restoration plans that have been prepared by the Friends of the Orinda Creeks at no expense to the city. He also explained to the council how further study of the creek will be useful in the development of the upcoming Downtown Precise Plan and Housing Element. For example, the data provided from the studies will help the city establish the top of the riverbank and the minimum setback requirements for buildings along the creek. Further, he said, the data will facilitate a substantive discussion of safety and flood risks within downtown Orinda. The location of property lines relative to the creek and surrounding features (retaining walls, outfalls, etc.) will be very useful for the work on the impending housing element.

The creek has not been modeled since 1990, Buckley added, noting that the creek has changed since then. A detailed survey will help determine how things change over time. He also speculated that the concrete channel is not in the best shape right now. Reminding the council of the major disaster that occurred on another Orinda creek and caused the Miner Road sinkhole, Buckley urged proactive identification of existing deficiencies in creek functionality.

In public comments, Ted Fleischman applauded the city council for the work it is doing on San Pablo Creek. Revitalizing the creek will bring back wildlife, plant life, and make the downtown better, he said. Nick Waranoff also commented. He opined that the city staff would later come back to the council for even more money, and that the proposed work could subject the city to liability or inverse condemnation, and would likely increase the cost of flood insurance. He judged the proposed work to be "very unfair to neighboring landowners and the citizens of Orinda."

Council Member Inga Miller, one of the two members of the downtown development subcommittee, agreed that it was a large amount of money in a city where the council takes such pride in being frugal. But this is a good use of city funds, she concluded, to assure that downtown development cares for the creek. Some of the creek-related issues she addressed included recreational opportunities, alternative transportation, the stormwater drainage issue in the face of more severe weather events, including 100-year storms. "The creek is a major storm-water mover," she noted, "and we haven't paid attention to it." Other salient points Miller noted were that the director of public works is also the Flood Plain director. The creek channel is up against a huge major road, and there are suggestions that the channel is breaking up. "This seems like win-win work," she concluded. The diligent work is needed for city infrastructure and, at the same time, the city is listening to our residents who want us to restore the creek. The other subcommittee member, Council Member Nick Kosla, stressed that he supported getting this work done so that everyone will have this standard.

Vice Mayor Dennis Fay noted that he was one of the council members who had questions at the March 16 meeting, but said that staff had done a good job of persuading him that the study will be useful, and it is important that we need to know. "Being an ostrich is not a good idea," he said. "We have sufficient funds, I'm prepared to move forward." Also prepared to move forward was Council Member Darlene Gee, who also had questions the last time the matter was before the council. But after the presentation, she agreed that there are multiple benefits of doing the additional work.

Mayor Amy Worth thanked city manager David Biggs for the reminder of the city's upcoming responsibilities of storm water management. "We are a watershed," Worth said; "water comes down and into the creeks." The matter passed unanimously.

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