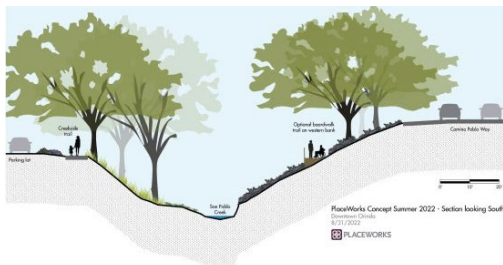




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Orinda City Council continues San Pablo Creek restoration project discussion

By Jennifer Wake



Further discussion regarding downtown development and creek restoration continued at the Sept. 6 Orinda City Council meeting. The proposed creek restoration project is part of the Downtown Precise Plan (DPP), which encourages revitalization in downtown Orinda. The DPP process began in January 2020 and has a target completion date of December 2022.

In December 2020, the City Council awarded a contract to PlaceWorks for San Pablo creek restoration analysis as a component of the DPP; the contract was amended to include a topographic survey and hydrology study in March 2021. The report included a review of a creek restoration concept developed in October 2019 by FlowWest for the Friends of Orinda Creeks (FOC).

Image courtesy staff report

"The city has been considering how to improve San Pablo Creek since at least 2000," Planning Director Drummond

Buckley said. "The city didn't put any investment into this issue until the PlaceWorks study."

According to a staff report presented by Buckley, the 2019 FOC concept proposes meanders and a creekside trail that would result in grading over property lines and into the rear parking lots of multiple existing businesses. Following completion of the topographic survey and hydrology study, PlaceWorks developed a creek concept that keeps the channels relatively straight rather than meandering like the 2019 FOC concept.

Questa Engineering Corp. principal/senior hydrologist Syd Temple, who was involved in the hydrology study, noted that adding meandering to the creek design would require widening the channel to add capacity to the flow and thus avoid flooding.

The PlaceWorks concept results in no net rise in flooding, provides improved trail access, and limits the extent of channel grading, according to the report. This plan would still result in the loss of parking and encroach into private property, but to a lesser degree.

Buckley noted that the challenge with the FOC concept, because it relies on private property, "it's like putting a puzzle together and you'd need approval from all of the property owners to move forward with the project." Buckley also mentioned how most sites are constrained by power lines across the parcels.

The PlaceWorks Spring 2022 concept proposes restoration features that are similar to the 2021 FOC Phase 1 Concept plan. Rock weirs are proposed to create step pools that facilitate fish movement, and the channel is kept relatively straight.

"Riparian restoration zones are included on the east bank near Santa Maria Way and on the west bank near the Safeway culvert to further enhance the existing habitat along the creek," the memo stated. "Restoration activities include removal of invasive exotic species and establishment of additional native tree, shrub, and groundcover species compatible with the riparian and upland conditions along the creek corridor. Generally, the channel maintains its original alignment and overall grade; however, the right bank is lowered so that it can facilitate a creek-side trail and enhanced floodplain connection. By keeping the channel alignment and providing channel cross-section expansion to impacts of channel bed improvements and enhanced vegetation offset any hydraulic impacts to the 100-year floodplain."

Other proposed improvements in the PlaceWorks concept include a creekside trail, an optional bridge and boardwalk, seating and furnishings, interpretative signage, and riparian habitat improvements.

During the Public Comment portion of the meeting, several members of Friends of Orinda Creeks expressed their desire to be part of the conversation and plans going forward.

According to the memo presented by PlaceWorks' consultant team Principal Isabelle Minn and Associate Designer Spence Koehler, following approval of the DPP and the associated California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) document, additional research into property ownership and easements would be necessary: "Owners of private property that may be impacted by creek or trail improvements would need to be informed and consulted, with potential City facilitation, to provide input and work as a group toward future implementation."

Construction documents should be developed for the trail, creek channel improvements, and restoration plantings, PlaceWorks added. "Channel improvements, such as rock weirs and bank stabilization, should be refined to minimize tree removal or damage. As part of advancing the proposed concept and developing schematic design (35 percent), the City should continue to coordinate with the FOC."

Once a schematic design concept has been developed, PlaceWorks noted it would be necessary to conduct a project-level environmental review for the creek improvement project under CEQA and seek necessary permits from natural resource agencies.

An overview of the DPP, including links to prior meetings and its relationship to the City of Orinda's 6th Cycle Housing Element, can be found on the dedicated website for these projects: <https://www.planorinda.com>. The entire PlaceWorks memo regarding San Pablo Creek restoration can be accessed in the Sept. 6 city council agenda packet at <http://orindaca.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=2101&Inline=True>

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