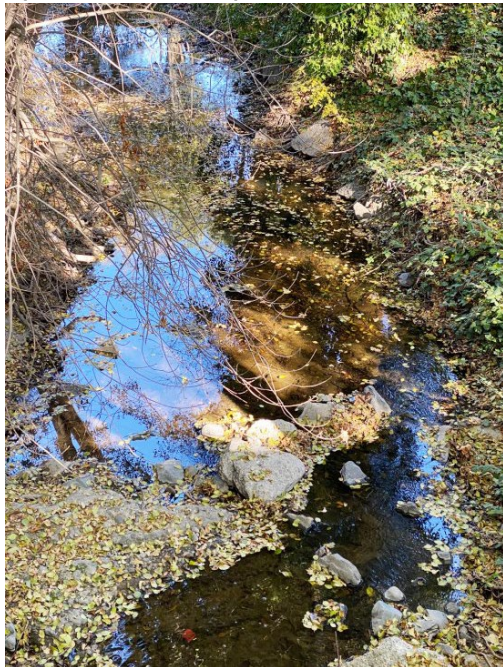


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## Orinda selects consultant for restoration of San Pablo Creek

By Sora O'Doherty



San Pablo Creek Photo Sora O'Doherty

Following decades of talking about the creek in downtown Orinda, the city council at its Dec. 1 meeting took a step forward, unanimously approving a contract with PlaceWorks as a creek consultant for the downtown precise plan. PlaceWorks will receive \$54,100 and the city manager is authorized to approve change orders up to \$8,115.

Isabelle Minn, principal of PlaceWorks and team members Sydney Temple, senior hydrologist of Questa Engineering Corp., and Jim Martin of the Environmental Cooperative all attended the Zoom council meeting and explained their experience and their roles in the creek restoration study.

PlaceWorks will hold a two-part kickoff meeting with city staff. The team will visit the project site with city staff to assess and document the condition of the creek before meeting with The Friends of Orinda Creeks to discuss the project, hear about past efforts and receive input regarding the current planning effort.

The PlaceWorks team will prepare a hydrologic resources report, a biological resources inventory and opportunities/constraints report, and a memo summarizing feedback on the restorations concept prepared by FlowWest. PlaceWorks will also hold a community engagement event and prepare a new

restoration concept memo, including a narrative description of the restoration concept, implications for planning and design in the downtown specific plan, a summary of CEQA requirements and recommendations for next steps.

According to the staff report, San Pablo Creek is an urbanized perennial creek that flows through the downtown precise plan project area. The creek daylights for approximately 1,500 feet near the intersection of Camino Pablo and Santa Maria Way before entering a culvert (behind Bank of America) that continues under the Safeway parking lot. A short segment also day-lights just northwest of Avenida de Orinda.

The Orinda general plan identifies use of San Pablo Creek in multiple policies, including the development of a beautification plan for downtown with guidelines for public improvements such as landscaping, tree grate design, outdoor lighting, tree planting and street furniture. The plan also encourages property owners to make more intensive use of the creek side of their buildings by designating a "private street" with public access parallel to the creek that would provide an alternative connection for shoppers.

The staff report, prepared by Planning Director Drummond Buckley, points out that the topic of San Pablo Creek restoration has been raised many times throughout the years as part of downtown planning efforts, and Friends of Orinda Creeks have been working for many years with the goal of restoring the creek. Restoration efforts date back to the 2001 San Pablo Creek Preliminary Restoration Plan. The ConnectOrinda Plan, adopted by the city council in November 2019, recommended a "Plan for Creek Access" project, which would highlight the creek, coordinating with landowners for public access, and incorporating features to enhance the creek experience.

In 2019, the city council established a strategic priority to work toward the long-term goal of daylighting and attaining restoration of San Pablo Creek from Santa Maria Way to the historic Orinda Way Bridge and design for pedestrian access throughout. In the downtown precise plan online survey conducted in May 2020, the creek was mentioned by respondents over 80 times. In addition, during the character area workshop in November, many attendees were supportive of restoration and/or access to San Pablo Creek as a community benefit as part of objective design standards, Buckley concluded.

The team members explained to the city council that their plan involves on-call creek restoration services for the city, including landscape architects, planners, environmental planners, and scientists trained in working on parks, trails, natural resource planning and design and community engagement.

Questa Engineering, founded 1982, will provide hydrologic resources and Environmental Collaborative,

founded in 1983, specializes in biological and wetland resource assessments, and has extensive experience over decades working on the city of Lafayette's downtown creek preservation project.

In response to questions from the council, Buckley said that the project plans to include a discussion of noise reduction from Camino Pablo, a large busy street on the west side of the creek. Mayor Darlene Gee expressed interest in identifying grants or other resources that might be available to fund the creek restoration. Buckley explained that the current project will make applying for grants easier because grantors will see that there is a plan in place to move forward with the project. City Manager Steve Salomon added that there are a number of places where the city can apply. "This item is a step to getting us to a point where the city will be able to tell funders that their money will result in hard results," Salomon said, adding, "I think this is a positive thing, that should give Orinda a tremendous ability to get money from outside sources."

In written public comments, Nick Waranoff said that "in these financially challenged times, the creek is a luxury item that Orinda cannot afford." Michael Bowen, chair of the Friends of Orinda Creeks restoration committee, offered strong support for the project. He said, "This is a really top-notch team to move the ball down the field," and that the Friends are very grateful for the talent the team has brought to the effort.

Vice Mayor Amy Worth was very pleased to support the project. "On all the times we have had meetings to talk about [creek restoration]," she said, "the auditorium has had a very large number of people who want us to move ahead with this." She agreed that if the city wants to compete for regional and other grants, it needs to have a viable plan and a commitment.

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