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Creeks Committee outlines accomplishments, next steps



Rain Garden project work on Golden Gate Way in Lafayette.

Photo J. Wake

By Lou Fancher

Members of the Lafayette Creeks Committee presented to the city council on Sept. 12 a report on progress made by the committee and the goals set as it moves forward and brings the city's Downtown Creeks Preservation, Restoration and Development Plan to the next stages.

Committee chair Will Elder began the joint panel presentation by announcing that the 1st Street and Golden Gate Way Rain Garden that broke ground Sept. 6 is expected to be complete in November. A celebration for opening the rain garden and the expected ribbon cutting ceremony are in the planning stage. Interpretive signage at the site is being developed in collaboration with the Resource Conservation and Flood Control districts, primarily undergoing refinements related to language and messaging.

Committee member David Clark outlined the work being done with city staff and a consultant to finalize required changes to city codes, plans

and guidelines as identified in the Downtown Creeks Plan. In the remaining months of this year and in 2023, the committee is investigating applying Government Code Section 66300(i) ("no net loss" provision for housing density) to allow setbacks on channelized creeks; hoping to achieve enhancements largely via using BART or other upzoning changes.

Committee member Ronald Hufft addressed the Arundo issue. "Arundo is a highly invasive plant that is in all of the Walnut Creek watershed including our Lafayette Creeks," Hufft said. "In addition to being invasive, it is fast-growing, it is water consumptive, it endangers banks, and in this dry condition now, it's a fire hazard."

The committee in partnership with the Walnut Creek Watershed Council (WCWC), a collaborator on habitat restoration projects throughout the area, focused on continued maintenance and replacement planting at the restoration site along Lafayette Creek near the downtown Gazebo.

Work performed to mitigate the arundo involved obtaining funding for expanded restoration at the West End of Mt. Diablo Boulevard. Arundo removal and diligent monitoring of the eradication on public and private property located along Lafayette's creeks have resulted in vast improvements. In the downtown area's public property, due to grant funding and a considerable amount of volunteer assistance, Hufft said, "We're in pretty good shape."

Hufft said 70-80% of the remaining arundo is on private property. Efforts made in this sector already involve an arrangement with the non-profit Restoration Trust to access more funding for creekside restoration on city land, including installing irrigation lines. Hufft said arundo, for people wanting to know if it is growing on their property, "is tall like bamboo and has leaves like corn." Home and property owners with questions or wanting to report arundo on their properties are encouraged to contact a committee member via contact information provided on the city's website.

MaryJo Cass, another committee member, said they are working to restore the riparian vegetation along the creek to improve the ambience, soil, wildlife and natural habitat. Native plant restoration projects at Gazebo, Leigh Creekside Park and West Reach along Mt. Diablo Boulevard are ongoing and have had stages of the projects completed. Cass said 15,000 native grass plugs have been installed at the West Reach location. Eventually, benches and viewing areas will be added along the creek. The 7,300-ft square Gazebo location, once overrun with arundo, blackberry bushes, and other invasive plants, was cleared and has, with the help of volunteers and some contracted labor, been restored with grass plugs. Cass said mallard ducks have been seen in the area. The north end of the Leigh Creekside Park area has also had blackberry bushes removed. The goal is to install native

plants and obtain funding for continued improvements and maintaining the location.

Combining several projects into what committee member Phil Bradley called the "Las Trampas Creek Reach" project, the committee has built on the work previously performed to restore the creek banks. Five tracts in which fallen trees and blackberry bushes created a hazard or poor sight lines were cleared. Bradley suggested the improvements will open the visual aesthetics of pedestrian walkways. Graffiti removal and other activities such as clean-up action and painting benches drew unexpected volunteer energy from people of all ages. He said the committee learned from this experience how to better coordinate with the public on their individual sub-projects. Timing for restoration efforts has also been refined and separated by season to achieve the most effective results in the coming years.

Included in the committee's 2022-2023 goals are plans to hold at least two large volunteer events for additional cleanup and native vegetation planting along Lafayette's seven creeks.

Peter Norton closed the presentation by briefly speaking about creek crossings that were identified and the work being done to install signage along 36 crossings. An Eagle Scout candidate has expressed enthusiasm and is completing the application process for leading the installation of signs. The committee will assist the Scouts in having the signs installed and will determine if additional signs are desired.

While moving forward with all of the projects, the committee plans to monitor city meetings such as those held by the Planning Commission, Design Review Commission and GPAC, for items with creek impact. More research, applications for funding, and work with city staff and the council to support and plan for next-phase creek projects in the downtown and other areas of the city are ongoing.

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