

Restoration plan complete for Kottinger Creek

New crossings, new landscaping and more

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by Carol Bogart

By this time next year, work to restore Kottinger Creek should be well underway. City civil engineer Jim Kelcourse said bids will go out next summer in hopes of getting much of the work done when it's dry in July and August. The work, altogether he said, should take about eight weeks, including the hydraulics.

The restoration plan has been fine-tuned since September 2003 as the Parks and Recreation Commission heard residents' concerns ranging from potential storm flooding as a result of changes, security worries related to increased vegetation, and even the risk of kids sparking fires on dry hillsides when sliding down them on slabs of cardboard.

Kottinger Park, described as a 14.5-acre long narrow park along Kottinger Drive from Cabernet Court east to just past Bernal Avenue, is most distinguished by the creek once known as Saint Mary's Creek.

Built in the 1960s, the park hasn't changed much since then, although improvement projects in recent years have upgraded irrigation systems and walking paths.

A more natural setting for the creek after years of having storm culverts and pedestrian crossings added as well as erosion of its banks, was the goal of a grassroots citizen's group called "Friends of Kottinger Creek."

The approved plan calls for adding groundcover on the banks to address the erosion problem. Although sparse at first, it's expected the plants will fill in within five years. Trees to be added, it was learned, will not obscure any undesirable activities in the park as was feared. A drawing of the improvements showed a thicker canopy than will actually result from the plantings.

As for the fire concerns, according to a Parks and Recreation Commission report, small grass fires of unknown origin have occurred and are a continuing worry for residents who can't be certain what starts them. Dry grass, it's been suggested, may be ready tinder if friction from cardboard "sleds" creates fire-starting conditions.

A proposed stepping stone crossing has been abandoned for fear elderly users might have trouble navigating the stones. Instead, a wooden footbridge will be installed.

The creek, as newly configured, will be an eight-foot-wide low flow channel meandering through a floodplain that varies in width from 27-46 feet. Invasive species along the park and creek corridor will be eliminated. Nine existing trees will be transplanted and 10 will be removed. One hundred thirty new trees and 500 new shrubs will be added in addition to the new groundcover.

Where three culverts cross the creek now, bridges will take their place if the project doesn't run out of money.

Howard Neely - a one-time member of the Parks and Recreation Commission - considers the project a colossal waste of money. (See opinion piece published today) Neely writes that, all told, the project will cost \$1 million dollars with "no new amenities." He believes it will "tear up about half the park," add bridges few will use and delete "a large portion of the lawn area." He calls the 200-member Friends of Kottinger Creek "a real squeaky wheel," and accuses the current commission of refusing to "make any changes or pull the plug" because the project is "too far along."

Cheri Puls, who lives across from Kottinger Creek and is a member of Friends of Kottinger Creek, counters that the project has wide support in the overall community. She said, "It's one of the few areas we have in Pleasanton that's natural. The value is the creek itself restored to proper function so the residents can enjoy a creek environment." She said the renovation will include educational aspects plus a manual that uses the Kottinger Creek plan as a prototype of other urban creek restorations in Pleasanton.

Amenities to be added, she said, are not play structures and dog parks, but a natural environment in which walkers can observe nature and wildlife, and, she said, picnic areas are being improved. The new bridges, she adds, replace culverts. Walkers and park maintenance, she said, need the crossings. As far as deleting lawn area, Puls points out that wide areas have been preserved for active recreation. She said, "We have not taken away anything that's currently being used."

The projected total cost, including planning, is \$1,049,635. Estimated construction costs range from \$700,000-\$1,200,000. On Oct. 14, the commission submitted an application to the California River Parkways Grant Program for a \$300,000 grant to help pay any funding shortfalls.

Kelcourse said the city could know by January whether the grant has been approved and adds that the creek project will improve water quality and enhance habitat for wildlife.