

# MISSION Accomplished

## Friends of Kottinger Creek's 7-year effort to restore the creek nears completion

by Emily Atwood

One morning, Earl Mincks went out into his yard on Kottinger Drive and looked across the street to the creek that flows through the neighborhood. The 1,820 feet of flowing water known as Kottinger Creek is one of Minck's favorite parts of Pleasanton, especially after living in the dry Phoenix climate for 40 years. As his eyes followed the meandering creek, he came upon his most cherished part: a pond surrounded by ... stumps?

"I high-tailed it down the creek just in time to see that they had a whole crew and they were digging the creek out," he said. "There was a natural dam that had built up and they had dug that out and drained the pond. As you might expect, I was livid."

The willow tree-lined pond wasn't just his favorite part of the creek, but it held special significance: a place where he took his young grandson to explore.

"I raised him up and we spent a lot of time roaming up and down the creek, particularly messing around in that one pond," he said. "I grew attached to it and just loved it."

Mincks wasn't the first to notice the stumps about seven years ago, but he was the first to act.

### Founding of 'Friends'

After speaking with the workers and staff at the city's Parks and Community Services Department, Mincks discovered the new plans for the creek. The city's plan, according to Mincks, was to straighten and cement the water flow and remove willow trees all the way east to Bernal Avenue.

Other neighbors and residents were concerned as well, including Mincks' daughter Cheri Puls and neighbor Pat Griffin. They, and other neighbors rallied together, forming Friends of Kottinger Creek. The non-profit, grassroots committee is a part of the Alameda Creek Alliance and advocates for the restoration and preservation of the creek, which is a tributary of Pleasanton's Arroyo Valle, which flows into Arroyo de la Laguna and Alameda Creek.

"Kottinger Creek brought us all together," Puls said. "We became more convicted of the importance of restoration and wanted to raise awareness."

The group then joined the Urban Creek Council to learn more about creek restoration and function. It was there they discovered that work done to straighten out creeks in the 1960s and 1970s was harmful to the creeks and surrounding habitats.

During a 2001 tour of the area, former Mayor Warren Harding, who died in 2003, recalled that Kottinger Park was donated to the city by developers of Vintage Hills. The free offer was too good to pass up, he said, and the city intended to leave it as natural as possible. The Friends group gave tours to other City Council members and won the support of former Mayor Tom Pico and cur-

rent Mayor Jennifer Hosterman. It was Pico who, after a tour, concluded that hydrology and ecology studies to assess the situation were in order.

"We wanted Kottinger Creek to be something we felt we would be happy with and proud of, and in turn, the city of Pleasanton would be proud to have," Mincks said. "We never had any idea of spending a lot of money."

Puls agreed, adding that originally they just wanted to have experts see what should be done.

The group also had support from other residents, with more than 450 people signing a petition.

"It was a really great lesson in the value of democracy and the ability of people to affect that," Puls said.

She doesn't consider herself to be an environmentalist, and wouldn't consider the majority of the group to be either. Residents from other neighborhoods joined the cause out of appreciation of nature and waterways. Griffin is a self-described tree hugger, one with a great love for nature.

"It's not a place for primary colors and machinery," she said. "It's just something that's beautiful and just the way it would have been years and years ago. I like the idea of having something so simple and not with batteries or something indoors."

### A partnership to heal the creek

There was much to do with the 1,820 feet of creek needing to be restored. Much of its natural glory had been compromised over the years by urbanization and conventional waterway management, according to the project summary.

"The project includes a complete new irrigation system for the park and creek to maintain the plants," said Jim Kelcourse, senior civil engineer for the city. "We removed the invasive species and planted new native plants and trees. We added a small foot bridge and other small amenities like a picnic area, clean-up area and an access ramp that allows handicapped access."

Griffin was not only pleased with the improvements, but she was also impressed by the relationship the group had with the city.

"What's really amazing is they kept us informed, it was just wonderful," she said. "They cared about what the neighbors thought. There's several [Friends members] who don't live right on the creek and the city has been very responsive. And that makes you feel good."

Puls agreed, saying that they were thrilled to have worked with Public Works Director Rob Wilson, Kelcourse and inspector and field manager Ken Maxwell.

"They were very diligent in making sure everything on the plan was accomplished," she said. "They communicated with us very

closely, keeping us informed [with the project and] about how long certain annoyances would continue."

Kelcourse also noted the increased community involvement in this project as compared to others.

Parks and Recreation Commissioner Jerry Pentin was aware of the improved relations.

"It's a great conclusion to a great partnership," he said. "[The Friends] were very well-organized and committed to what they wanted to get done and it has been done. Instead of being against each other, [the city and the residents] became allies and worked together."

"What we have now is beautiful," Puls said, "but the aesthetics aren't really what caused it to happen. We're looking for a system in balance, so you don't have excessive corrosion. It works properly for cleaning the bay."

**In addition to the coveted meander, the creek now boasts a sequence of pools, ripples and floodplains. Along the creek bed are newly planted vegetation and trees.**

### A hefty price tag or well worth the money?

The restoration met much opposition when the projected cost went from \$30,000 (the city's original cost of maintenance, not restoration) to \$1.2 million.

Pentin remembers it as a project that started small and grew.

"Our biggest concern was the escalating price," he said. "I'm sure for the residents that use that park, it will be a great amenity and a great improvement. Absolutely repairing the stream to its natural state is wonderful."

Griffin was surprised at the opposition. "We didn't want to hurt anyone down stream or alter anything in that sense," she said. "It's such a wholesome project that we're actually surprised some would go against it."

Yet Kelcourse said Kottinger Creek's restoration is not the city's priciest creek project.

Just south of the new Valley Avenue underpass and adjacent to Interstate 680 are several creeks including upper and lower Sycamore Creek. Called the Bernal Creek because of its location to the future park site, the restoration is close to completion. The price tag? About \$2.1 million. One difference, however, is this project received about \$1 million in grants.

"I think [the price is] in line with creek restoration at least in doing Kottinger Creek

and Bernal creek," Kelcourse said. "What you're trying to do is introduce a more meandering channel through sinuosity (winding) and channel alignment which is more consistent with a natural creek."

Puls said while the cost grew, it wasn't inappropriate.

"As far as the price is concerned, all we were asking for is for studies to be done," she said. "The studies in fact dictated what needed to be changed. [The price] didn't escalate into an amusement park or go beyond the scope of work prescribed. It's fair to say that the work that needed to be done was probably the result of past conventional practices for the time. Everything evolves."

She also added that over seven years of waiting, the cost of construction increased.

The restoration of Kottinger and Bernal creeks accommodates a slow flow of run-off water as opposed to a fast moving, linear channel heading for disposal. The benefits of these restored creeks are slower velocities, improved water quality and the potential for wildlife, not to mention the aesthetic value.

Griffin said she considers the money as an investment future generations will enjoy and other cities around the Bay Area can see as a model.

### Enjoying the park again

The Friends are excited and proud of the end result.

"I think water is a magnet," Puls said, "especially functioning, clean water. What attracts people to the park is the same thing that's always been attractive—the experience of a natural area in the city."

Although there are currently fences around the creek area, the project is complete. Kelcourse said a mandatory 90-day waiting period has begun. During this time plants are being monitored to make sure the new vegetation is rooting and thriving. If plants die, the contractors will have to replace them and the 90-day waiting period will start over.

"Assuming all the plants and trees survive, the creek will officially be completed this August," Kelcourse said.

In addition to the coveted meander, the creek now boasts a sequence of pools, ripples and floodplains. Along the creek bed are newly planted vegetation and trees.

"The trees will make a lovely canopy over the creek," Puls said. "The canopy cools the water, which fosters aquatic and animal life. We've seen a return of frogs and ducks."

The group also hopes it can serve as an educational tool. In the beginning when the group was presenting to the City Council, they also took big posters to schools so children could learn about the creek and what was going on. Puls said she hopes that will continue and that signs can be added along the walkway so it can be an educational resource for the community.

Mincks said his favorite time to visit the park now is around 10 a.m.

"The sun is just right and it reflects off the water," he said. "From the upper trail, it's just gorgeous. It looks just like a trail of sprinkled diamonds meandering through the trees." ■



The Friends of Kottinger Creek began upon discovering willow trees along the creek had been cut down.



Restoration of the creek included saving the meander and making the creek bed self-sustaining.



The project is complete, but the fences remain as the newly planted vegetation takes root.

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