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Oakland Starts \$850,000 Creek Revamp

Polluted section of Peralta Creek in Cesar Chavez Park to get new plants, bridge and pathway this summer

Laura Casey, STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND -- A small stretch of Peralta Creek runs through Cesar Chavez Park in the Fruitvale district -- unnoticed, murky and full of junk. On Thursday, city and county officials, creek conservationists and community activists pounded a shovel into the earth to mark the beginning of the restoration process this small stretch of waterway will soon undergo.

About 200 feet of the creek, which borders the southwest end of the park, will get an \$850,000 face lift this summer. Workers will remove a flood-overflow culvert, re-grade and replant the creek banks with native flora, and install a new pedestrian bridge and path.

"We're really especially proud of this park, and this creek restoration project will add to our pride and the community's pride," said Marsha Murrington of the Spanish-Speaking Unity Council, a restoration partner.

The project is the third creek restoration of the Collaborative Creek Improvement Program, a partnership between the city's environmental services division and Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, which paid for it along with the California Department of Water Resources and Measure K bond money.

The 5-foot-tall bank, which hides the creek from view, invites people to engage in illegal activity, such as dumping garbage, drug sales and use, creek activist Leslie Estes said. When it is restored, the creek will have gently sloping banks within the line of sight of neighbors and park users.

The redesign was a move that discouraged illegal activity at East Oakland's Arroyo Viejo Park, where restoration was completed March 2002, Estes said.

"You can just see the difference in activity there," she said.

About \$375,000 of the \$800,000 cost to restore the creek is being paid by the city. The county is paying the bulk of the cost, which was higher than expected because workers must demolish the heavily-reinforced flood-overflow culvert before working on the rest of the project, Estes said.

"We did not anticipate the demolition expense to be this large," she said. Despite the increased cost, the restoration is considered necessary to improve overall city water quality and neighborhood safety, she said. Oakland has about 40 miles of creeks, most in underground culverts, throughout the city. They all either drain into Lake Merritt or the San Francisco Bay. The move to beautify creeks is gaining momentum with the support from city leaders who say they value green space and welcome any opportunity to improve city parks.

The first restoration effort was at Sausal Creek in the Oakland hills.

Oakland City Council President Ignacio De La Fuente (San Antonio-Fruitvale) said he appreciates the groups' efforts in the neighborhood he represents.

"I really believe that the tone of the problem we have in the flatlands ... is we don't have enough community spaces we can enjoy."

This project will give his community an opportunity to connect with the city's waterways, De La Fuente said.

Estes said work will begin in June and should be completed by fall.

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