

Santa Clara Valley Water District Board of Directors  
5750 Almaden Expressway  
San José, CA 95118  
via email, sent Aug. 15, 2017

re: Board Agenda 8/22/17, Item 6.3. Joint Use Trails on District Property: Status and Updates

Dear Boardmembers,

As noted in the Aug. 22nd agenda, the District is facing challenges in balancing trail development with stream stewardship. I'd like to give some background and share some thoughts on this balance.

Human presence can impact a sensitive riparian ("creekside") habitat, and one can argue that the further away the public is kept, the better. And, indeed, I have seen some local trails (some parts of the Guadalupe in downtown come to mind) that appear to have been built within a sensitive habitat and too close to the creek. However, I submit that trails can be designed to have minimal impact, and also that public access can have its benefits.

San José's Riparian Corridor Setback Policy was developed with creek trails in mind. The Policy can be traced back to the "Coyote Creek Long Range Land Utilization Taskforce" of 1990. Back then, some on city staff wanted a new golf course to be laid out across the Coyote Creek: cut down the trees and play back and forth across the creek's channel, with the Coyote Creek Trail relegated to a sidewalk around the outside. We on the taskforce objected, (1) because of the impacts to the trail, and (2) because of the impacts to the creek's natural habitat, and so we developed recommendations for a riparian policy for the park-chain. The taskforce collected input from a wide range of sources, including a number of developers and environmental advocates, and we discovered a range of recommended setbacks. Then, specifically to allow room for the trail, we chose the largest setback we thought practical – 100 foot: we reasoned that the extra space would allow room for the trail to be routed safely away from sensitive areas. (Our efforts were successful: the riparian habitat was saved, the trail now runs alongside it, and the Los Lagos Golf Course was built on either side and safely away from the creek.) A few years after our taskforce, the city reviewed our suggestions for riparian setbacks, refined the definitions somewhat, and in 1994 officially adopted them as citywide guidelines; these guidelines were further refined in 1999. Last year, the guidelines were cast in the form of an ordinance and officially adopted.

There are a number of reasons to support safe public access with creekside trails:

- As I have observed firsthand, public access can actually help to improve the habitat. When I was working on our neighborhood's Urban Stream Restoration Project (with the SCVWD on the Los Gatos Creek), I observed that, before there was public access to the project area, some nearby residents would dump their trash onto the creek banks: they'd just toss empty oil cans and dirty diapers over their back fences. Once the trail was built, these trash-dumping habits ceased: now the area is nearly spotless, with trail users voluntarily picking up every little bit of litter on a daily basis.
- Trails can help reduce the impact of the homeless: those living by the creek generally do not appreciate having joggers dashing by early in the morning. Without public access, there is less public oversight of the creek and fewer people to report any problems.
- People are naturally drawn to water. If access is not provided, or when trails are routed too far from the creek, people will be tempted to jump the fence to get closer – and there is then nothing else to keep them from getting into the sensitive habitat and right down to the water's edge. However,

when the trail is routed relatively close to the water, the public is generally content to stay on the trail and view the creek from there, safely away from sensitive habitat areas.

- If the public does not have access to creekside trails, they can become less aware of the creeks. They become less inclined to object to proposed developments that could encroach upon and impact the creeks; less aware of the impacts of dumping materials that could flow into those creeks; and less inclined to support bond measures to protect the creeks. “Out of sight, out of mind.”

Some cities, especially older ones back east, once had whole networks of rail lines, and now those cities are adapting unused rail right-of-ways as trail corridors that cross the town. The San José area, however, had few tracks: many are still in use, and much of the unused right-of-way has been converted to housing. (The former Western Pacific line is San José’s only candidate left for rail-to-trail conversion: the “Five Wounds Trail” in eastern San José and “the Three Creeks Trail” in Willow Glen and southern San José.) As we’re lacking a network of old rail corridors here, the District’s creek corridors become especially important in the creation of off-road trail connections.

(Note: We in the community look forward to working with the District and others on a number of possible creek-trail projects, including the daylighting of the Los Gatos Creek at Montgomery St./Park Ave., the completion of the Los Gatos Creek Trail in the Google complex at the Diridon Station, and the renaissance of the Coyote Creek Trail in “Coyote Meadows” near Kelley Park.)

Off-road trails are important: they provide a safe and enjoyable place for anyone to walk, jog, or bike. They are great for “the rest of us” – those who feel unsafe biking along busy streets: they enable us to get to work or around town without having to get into a car. The City, County, and State are all actively trying to reduce the “vehicle miles traveled”, both to reduce congestion and to reduce CO2 and other pollutants. By supporting and encouraging these non-polluting transportation alternatives, the District can help improve the environment – not only in its creek habitats, but also throughout the entire region.

Trails do not need to be illuminated at night: trail users can carry their own lights. However, if desired, there are ways to light a trail without “light-polluting” the surrounding habitat. I’ve seen trails in quite sensitive habitats with LED lights in the handrails: they directly illuminate the trail without light spilling into sensitive areas.

Riparian habitat can actively be restored, as we did with our Urban Stream Restoration Project, or it can be left to recover on its own, as has happened in Campbell. The Los Gatos Creek there was once a rather barren industrial drainage channel: now, even with a well-used trail on either side, a nicely recovered habitat thrives in the middle.

As the Board considers the stewardship balance, I urge it to remember that people and creeks can be compatible – when care is taken in design and implementation to accommodate the needs of both.

Thank you.

~Larry Ames

member, Los Gatos Creek Streamside Park Committee, 1984 - ~2000

member, Coyote Creek Long Range Land Utilization Task Force, 1990

project manager, Los Gatos Creek Urban Stream Restoration Project, 1993 - '96

member, SCVWD Environmental Advisory Committee, 2002 - '08

cc: SCVWD: Melanie Richardson, Sue Tippetts  
Pat Colombe, retired SJ Planner and Riparian Policy lead  
Colin Heyne, Silicon Valley Bike Coalition  
Board of Directors, Save Our Trails  
SJ Parks Advocates: Jean Dresden and Harvey Darnell  
Garnetta Annable & Virginia Holtz, Coyote Creek Long Range Land Utilization T'force members  
SJ Riparian Advocates  
District 6 Neighborhood Leaders Group (D6NLG)  
Committee for Green Foothills: Director Megan Medeiros and Advocate Alice Kaufman  
Los Gatos Creek Streamside Park Committee: Libby Lucas  
Open Space Authority liaison: Dave Poeschel  
Coyote Meadows Coalition: Deb Kramer and Terry Christensen