

Cerrito Creek north of Albany Hill

Presentation for Albany Parks Commission by Susan Schwartz, President,
Friends of Five Creeks

History

Issues

- Flooding
- Access
- Maintenance

Reaches:

San Pablo to Adams

Adams to Albany Meadow/El Cerrito's Creekside Park

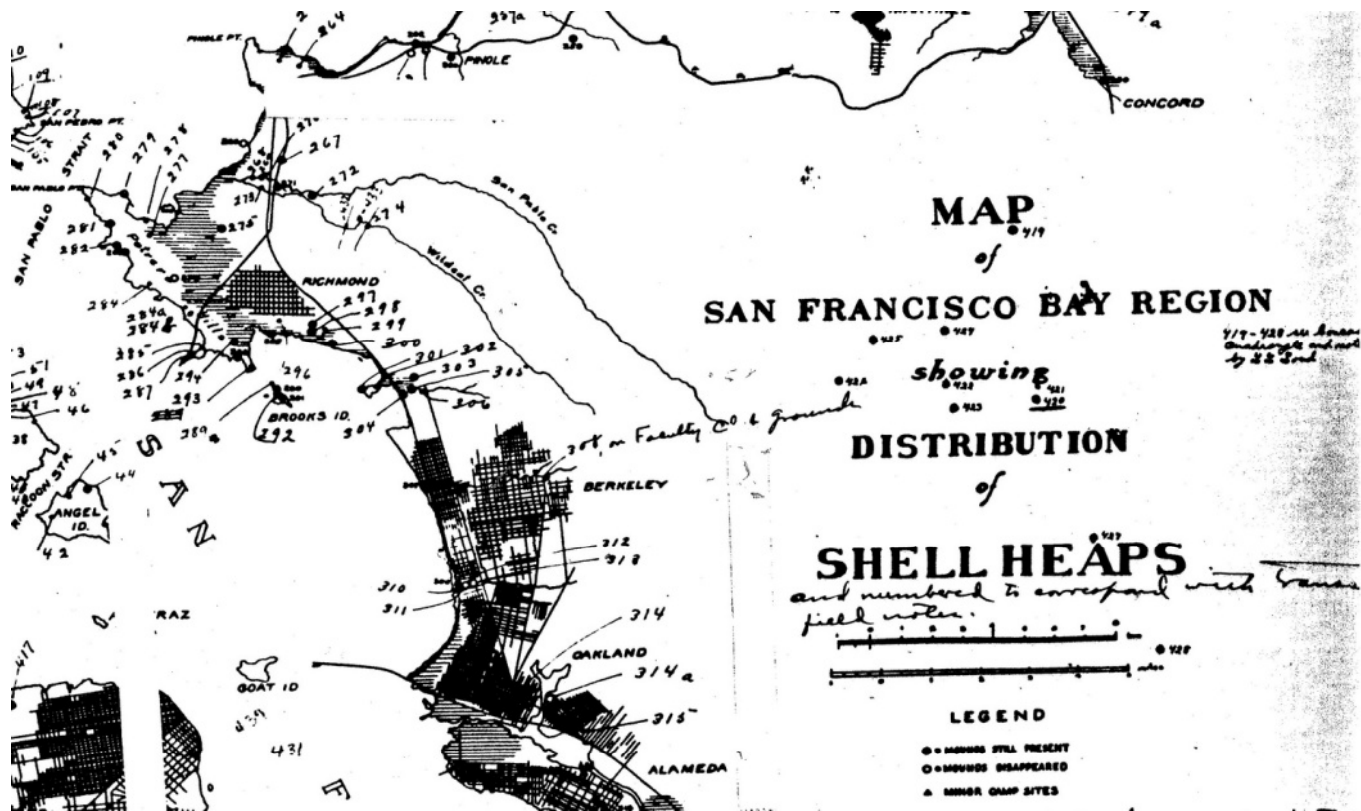
Albany Meadow downstream to brackish reach

Lowest portion alongside Bayside Commons

Goal and take-home points



1861 map : fan of creeks including Cerrito join to form a large salt marsh, west of San Pablo and north of Albany Hill, extending to Pt. Isabel. Graveyard, sausal at Middle Ck. Mouth.



Early 20th Century map shows shell mounds ringing the marsh, with three on Cerrito Creek north of Albany Hill.

Mortar rocks and shells remain at foot of hill.

1946 aerial: Creek straightened, marsh filled.

However, land where the marsh had been continued to flood, worsening as city building increased impermeable surfaces.



After a 1953 flood, the head of Stege Sanitary District wrote:

“Nothing appears to justify use of this area for dwellings; and, the character of construction permitted in the past has involved a succession of unwise buyers of homes in losses and disappointments only partly compensated by sale to some newer victim.”

1969: White Front (now Pacific East Mall) in Richmond built, with fill higher than homes to east. Also in 1969, El Cerrito redevelopment creates iCreekside Park with flood-retention ponds, retaining wall with summer dam (never or very briefly used). Ponds lessened but did not end floods -- in fact, 1969 floods were declared a disaster.

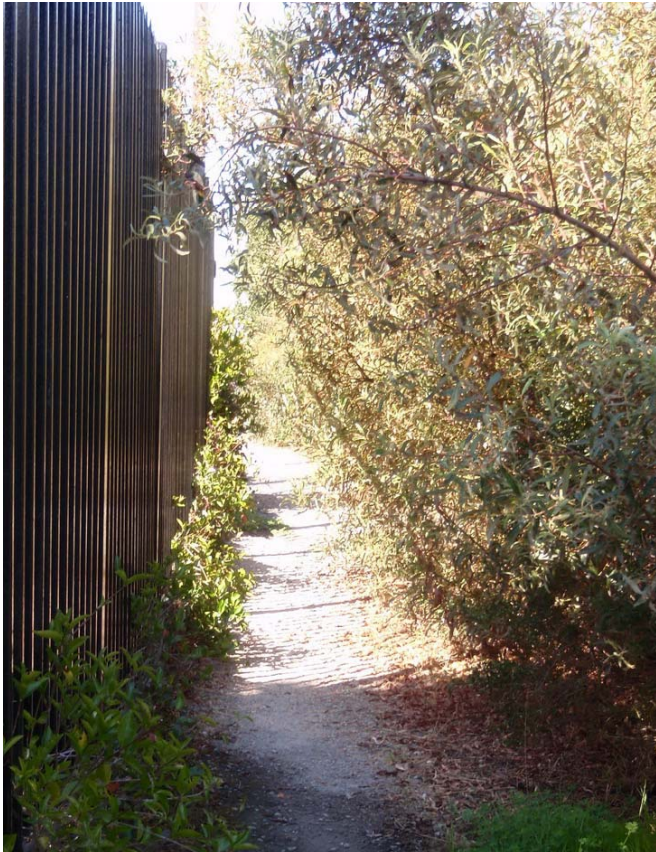


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Access:

In 1964, Orientation Center for the Blind built on three acres, cutting off Adams Street and former road right-of-way north of hill. Discussions could be pursued with Orientation Center for trail along south side of creek and/or Adams Street crossing.

In the 1980s, Bayside Commons was built, giving Albany an 8-foot-wide “trail easement” that lay in the creek. Moving this easement to the existing narrow trail may be approved by Council September 19.



Cerrito Creek Trail plan, adopted by Albany and El Cerrito and gradually being implemented (e.g. new bike trail on Pierce) calls for south side pedestrian trail and possible bridge.

Left: when a man slipped into a creek during a storm, it took 20 minutes to reach him.

In 1998-2000, the Berkeley-Albany sewer along the creek was rebuilt. Afterwards, vegetation maintenance decreased sharply in all three cities.



Left, west end San Pablo culvert 1998. Right, 2011.



Left, below San Pablo 1998. Right, 2011.

Evergreen thornless blackberry can span the creek in a year.

This has blocked the culvert and caused flooding upstream.



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Adams Street end 1998, left, and 2004, right.





After the City of El Cerrito cut the blackberries, intense volunteer effort 2005-8 brought this area under control and made it attractive. Camping and dumping stopped, even after fence removed.



Maintenance decreases – down to one heavy clearing yearly with occasional checks.

The brush pile is what F5C's Weekday Weed Warriors removed in summer 2011.

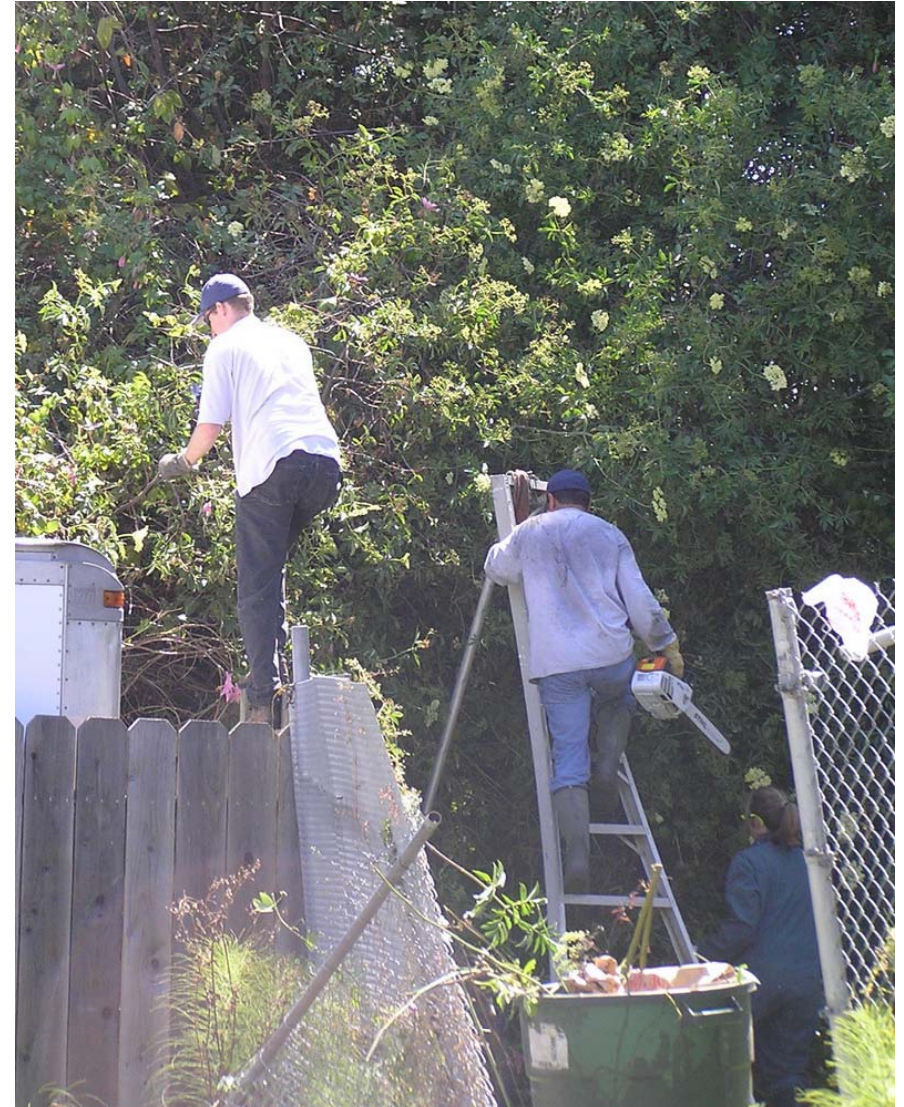




Working here, F5C discovered the invasive parasite Japanese dodder. Dept. of Agriculture staff cleaned it out. This led to broad campaign.

Seeds and fragments wash and blow from three cities and the Bay. New invasives will come – e.g. pellitory and purple-velvet grass, both allergenic.

Vigilance and knowledge will always be needed.





Left, Cerrito Creek between Adams and Creekside Park (near Yosemite), 1998.

Below, same area, 2004.



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Partnership: With Bay Trail grant, El Cerrito improved the creekside walkway and increased visibility.

Usage soared: commuters, shoppers, park users, dog walkers, more.

(This was possible because F5C had opened fence and built trail at Pacific East Mall.)

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New gate provided access. Intense volunteer effort 2005-9 included tarping morning glory for three years. Maintenance now light but frequent -- morning glory still re-sprouts,





In the meadow between the Orientation Center and Middle Creek, 1-2 volunteer visits yearly got control head-high weeds.

For the future: Ivy, blackberries, and morning glory on banks of Cerrito and Middle Creeks.

Access to this meadow is difficult. However, a bridge over Middle Creek might create problems with camping and partying.

In the past, Orientation Center has been more interested in through trail (to Pacific East Mall) than access.





Mouth of Middle Creek. Left, 1998. Below, 2004.

The old line sewer line was broken up to make a more natural mouth that trout or salmon could navigate.

This may have lowered Middle Creek. The adjacent willow grove no longer floods.



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In the willow grove west of Middle Creek, F5C cleared blackberries and cape ivy twice -- failing to follow up the first time.

Only light maintenance needed now, but without it blackberries would re-invade from Middle Creek.

Clearing has reduced camping here, but vigilance needed.





After sewer reconstruction, Albany used mitigation funds to pay Shelterbelt Builders to plant natives propagated from plants on the hill (genetically local plants).

Shelterbelt planted most trees along the creek. Many understory plantings failed.



Evergreen thornless blackberry was trimmed, not dug out.

Timed mowing did not establish native grasses or get rid of tall weeds in meadow areas.



When money ran out, blackberries rapidly took over creek bank.

Tall weeds made meadows unusable much of year.
2004-2005 photos.





Blackberries spanned creek and slowed flow. Debris dams formed, and silt built up in thickets, narrowing the flood way.

Flooding worsened.





F5C 2005-ongoing: Cut, dig, control erosion, plant natives, repeat – about 50-75' per year.



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Several rounds of digging needed.

Bank, flood plain, and slope often done in different years.

Albany and El Cerrito remove green waste.

Through 2009, Albany paid for initial cutting.





Removing cape ivy, digging small weeds, tarping morning glory also go on for years.

Tall meadow weeds mostly gone except east of Bayside Common fence.

Camping gone from cleared areas.



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Above, area cleared 2009-10.
New understory still small.

Below, adjacent area not yet
cleared.

Small, non-adjacent patches
cleared to minimize any erosion
or slide problems. (None so far.)



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Partnerships:
F5C provided
benches, tables, signs
– cities installed them.

Boy Scout Eagle
projects built safety
fence and steps,
painted mural.



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Special considerations in lowest reaches:

- Banks near Pierce are extremely steep – not good for volunteers.
- Extend railing east along steepest bank?
- Pepperweed, an extremely serious and difficult-to-control invasive, must be cut or dug 1-2 times a year.
- Albany's new easement will not resolve responsibility for maintenance.





Goal: Low maintenance urban oasis for people and wildlife

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Points to remember for Creekside Park:

- Be flexible. No one has answers; needs will change.
- Be vigilant. New challenges will appear and are best dealt with quickly. Delaying maintenance will cost dearly.
- Know the area. Different sections have different needs. Maintenance will decrease, but someone – a consultant? – must be knowledgeable.
- Avoid embracing any single environmental goal . Compromise and balance.
- Institutional memory is short. Use photography (photomonitoring) to record existing and desirable conditions.