

# Soquel creek suffering from upstream problems

By BOB SMITH

Soquel Creek may be in serious trouble.

Over the decades since the settlers first arrived in Santa Cruz County, the stream has been a major attraction as it winds its way through the city of Capitola to Monterey Bay.

Thousands of people have played in the creek each summer after it is dammed to form Capitola Lagoon.

Many thousands more come to Capitola each fall to watch the famed Capitola Begonia Festival Nautical Parade on the lagoon.

But in the past few years, residents and frequent visitors to the creek have noticed that the water is getting shallower and shallower.

Areas where children once dove into the creek are now shallow enough to allow the kids — now adults — to wade across the stream without getting their knees wet.

Ducks and geese can easily feed on the bottom-growing plants without diving beneath the water surface.

Begonia Festival directors find they can now barely get an upstream as far as Shadowbrook Restaurant. Outboard motors, the preferred form of propulsion for years, are now used very carefully because of the very shallow water depths.

Two Capitola City Council members are asking

their colleagues to set aside \$10,000 to start a dredging program this fall that will clear some of the tons of sand, gravel, and debris that has been steadily clogging the streambed over the years.

The council has taken no formal action on the request by Councilmembers Carin Mudgett and Ron Graves, but City Manager Steve Burrell is including a \$10,000 line item in the final budget the council will be asked to adopt tonight.

Burrell has already been instructed by the council to negotiate with the Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District and the U.S. Soil Conservation Service to look into the creek's problems and find the sources of the silt that has been clogging the river bed.

Mrs. Mudgett and Graves have gone one step further and are seeking immediate city action on cleaning out the streambed.

Mrs. Mudgett has lived in Capitola full time for the last 12 years and in a creekside home for the last eight years.

But she's been a regular summer time visitor to the community all of her life, visiting in the home her grandmother purchased in 1935 and she now lives in.

Recently, she's seen some changes in the creek that conflict sharply with her childhood memories.

"You used to be able to dive off the boat dock — albeit a shallow dive. I assume the depth was about four feet.

"You could take a rowboat up to Peery Park. Now we can't even get up to the Rispin Mansion on a high (water level) day.

"Today," she said last week, looking at the creek as it moved sluggishly past her yard, "you could get around the first bend (100 yards downstream of the Rispin Mansion)."

Her third childhood recollection was somewhat different. "You used to have to wear tennis shoes when you went wading because there were so many rocks and it hurt your feet."

Today, by comparison, the bottom is comparatively smooth, sandy bottom, easy to walk on by a person with even the tenderest feet.

"I hate to see the whole thing fill up with dirt and sand," she added.

She and Graves warn of the impact on the city's major tourist attraction — the Begonia Festival — if the stream continues to fill. The stream is rapidly approaching the point, Graves recently told the Begonia Festival board of directors, where it may no longer be possible to use it for the annual Nautical Parade — even with the shallow draft floats the Festival has purchased in the last few years.

The Begonia directors concurred with Graves' analysis and have promised to support any proposal made to the full City Council.

There is another problem with the silting creek — flooding.

City officials are reluctant to discuss it, but do consider the danger of major flooding from ordinary winter storms if the creek continues to fill in.

The situation is similar to the one faced by the City of Santa Cruz where sand has filled in the San Lorenzo River channel through the downtown business district, making it improbable now that the channel can contain the 100-year flood it was built to contain.

Burrell believes it would cost at least \$10,000 to clear the channel, but warns the cost could be much higher once a plan is developed by the city and the Soil Conservation Service, and approved by the California Department of Fish and Game.

Most of the sand and sediment is apparently coming from outside the Capitola city limits and therefore, outside the city's direct control.

But the city is ready to finance a Soil Conservation Service (SCS) survey of the creek to find the erosion sources.

Burrell has been meeting with Richard Casale, district conservationist for the

U.S. Soil Conservation Service on the possibility of the city joining or contracting with the Santa Cruz County Resource Conservation District for a survey and development of plans to halt it.

Capitola, like the other three cities in Santa Cruz County, is outside the Resource Conservation District, and normally can't avail itself of the SCS expertise.

Casale and Burrell are proposing a \$500 annual contract between the city and district for the SCS service. The amount is about the same as city property owners would pay if the city annexed to the district, but the city avoids the relatively high annexation fees that would be charged by the county and the state Board of Equalization.

Once an agreement is approved, Casale will begin a "stream reconnaissance" of Soquel Creek, looking for the sediment source(s).

Finding the sources isn't a difficult task, says Casale, but the solutions will be up to the county and the individual property owners.

"The city just gets the end product," Casale added.

Casale speculates that the sediment could be coming from one or more of several sources, including natural stream bank

erosion, newly built roads and driveways, landslides that constantly feed material into the creekbed, winter erosion of cultivated land, and log jams that collect silt and sand and then break loose, sending a cloud of debris downstream into Capitola.

The city's dredging proposal, Casale said, "is an after-the-fact measure but sometimes it is necessary to protect lives and private property, especially in Capitola. There is a major district (the village) in danger of flooding."

Casale said the Soil Conservation Service can advise Capitola on how to dredge or clean out Soquel Creek, but added: "The Soil Conservation Service does not involve itself in a dredging program — that's a very sensitive issue.

"Our business is to get to the erosion before the sediment winds up in the creek."

The major hurdle for the city to clear in any plans to clean out the creek is the Department of Fish and Game.

State law gives the department the authority to oversee any work in a streambed.

Fishery biologist Randy Benthin said the city will have to negotiate an agreement with DFG before any work in the streambed begins.

DFG opposition to streambed clearing has been cited by former Capitola officials as the prime reason for not cleaning out the bed in past years.

"It is not that we are opposed to the work, just to poor work practices that would harm fish and wildlife," Benthin said.

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