

**With more than 20 years of hands-on experience caring for natural areas in the City of El Cerrito, Friends of Five Creeks offers the following background and recommendations for a proposed El Cerrito Parks Master Plan.**

**1. Specific plans, expertise, and budgets for maintaining “natural” areas:**

**Abundant experience has shown that for parks where the goal of human enjoyment is paired with health of habitat and biodiversity, as well as requirements for safety from flood and/or fire, the weakness is maintenance (many specifics available, with photos). The following points seek to address that weakness:**

*A. El Cerrito’s Parks Master Plan should recognize the need for specialized knowledge and training for such parks at all staff levels, and include policies and priorities for ongoing education, training, and hiring of staff or consultants that meet these needs.*

*B. Each such park or perhaps type of park (e.g. creekside parks) should have a simple, written, easily amended, publicly available maintenance plan that recognizes these parks’ goals and gives guidelines for carrying them out. Such plans should recognize that “natural” areas in cities require stewardship, which may require various amounts of expertise. Stewardship may involve lessening risks of flood or erosion, tree maintenance and removal, fire prevention, visibility and crime prevention, litter removal, maintenance and sometimes building or rebuilding of paths and service roads, control of harmful invasives, protection and sometimes planting of diverse native plants of all sizes, and maintenance of sources of food, water, and shelter for wildlife. Such plans should promote conservation and enrichment of habitat, take account of specific species where they are mapped, and recognize that nature changes.*

These plans should be developed in concert with the Public Works, Police, and Fire Departments, as well as citizens including volunteers helping with stewardship of the area. These should be inexpensive, flexible documents (no costly consultants), easily changed as required by changing conditions and regulations, as well as what is learned from experience.

*C. Each such plan should lead to a clear, publicly available yearly budget for maintenance. Ongoing maintenance will be much cheaper than fire, flood, fines, liability settlement, or similar.*

**2. Hillside Natural Area**

A. Section 1 above, subparts A, B, and C, apply here.

B. *“Built” facilities:* In general, the goal for the Hillside Natural Area should be open space for human enjoyment along with maintenance and improvement of biodiversity, and habitat, with a minimum of recreation requiring construction or disturbance of land. Some “built” facilities may be desirable on the periphery, especially in areas that have been significantly altered – for example, a dirt-bike and skate park at the east end of Snowden, a picnic area somewhere.

C. *Bicycles:* Plans for the Hillside Natural Area should incorporate reasonable bicycle use. However:

- Bicycles should not be allowed on single-track trails where they are obvious dangers to themselves, other trail users, and/or the trail – for example, the narrow failing trail on a steep slide slope running south from Douglas Drive.
- Careful consideration should be given to potential hazards and problems of allowing bicycles on steep east-west service roads.
- Plans for bicycle use should be developed with clear understanding of State Water Board and Department of Fish and Wildlife regulatory requirements for creek crossings, which could make new or changed creek crossings difficult and/or expensive.

### **3. Cerrito Creek at El Cerrito Plaza**

A. Section 1 above, subparts A, B, and C, apply here.

B. *Opening the creek with creekside trail along El Cerrito Plaza.* El Cerrito’s General Plan, Zoning (creek overlay), and other documents, on line at <http://www.fivecreeks.org/background/>, show that it has been long-term city policy to create a park and trail along a “daylighted” Cerrito Creek at the south edge of El Cerrito Plaza since 1996 (See Joint Watershed Goals Statement). The slow but steady process this policy mandated has led to restoration of the creek from Talbot to Kains in 2004 and the recent opening of a previously culverted segment in the southeast corner of the Plaza. Any new park plan should explicitly recognize this longstanding policy and the intent to carry it out when other properties (such as the medical office or bank buildings) are redeveloped. (Both banks of the creek here are in El Cerrito.)

### **4. Cerrito Creek west of San Pablo, and Creekside and Central Parks**

A. Section 1 above, subparts A, B, and C, apply here.

B. *Bridging Cerrito Creek, improving the Cerrito Creek Creekside Trail:* In the area of Creekside Park, both banks of Cerrito Creek are in El Cerrito. El Cerrito should again consider working with Albany to bridge Cerrito Creek, so that people could easily go between and enjoy both El Cerrito’s rather urban Creekside Park and Albany’s larger and wilder Creekside and Albany Hill Parks. The joint Albany/El Cerrito 2004 study found the most likely bridge side would be near the end of Belmont Avenue.

El Cerrito also should try to work with Richmond and Pacific East Mall to improve the creekside trail along Cerrito Creek in Richmond west of the El Cerrito boundary. This decomposed granite trail was built by Friends of Five Creeks about 2002. It has held up remarkably well, but will not last forever.

See “Page references for documents related to Cerrito Creek bridges” (PDF) and the “2004 Cerrito Creek Bay Trail Connector Feasibility Study,” both online at <http://www.fivecreeks.org/background/>.

C. *Planning Creekside and Central Parks as a unit:* There is obvious potential for better linkages and complementary uses for small Central and Creekside Parks . The Belmont storm drain channel (partly in El Cerrito and partly in Richmond) is a possible link.

D. *Need for considering flood potential due to climate change:* (The following comments have been edited somewhat from a project submitted as part of Contra Costa County’s upcoming Stormwater Plan.)

The low-lying, filled former marshland north of Cerrito Creek, west of San Pablo, and east of Richmond, is likely to be affected by rising sea levels and increased storm intensity. (See historic map at [http://www.fivecreeks.org/history/#coastal\\_survey](http://www.fivecreeks.org/history/#coastal_survey)). Ordinary high tides, with no rain, back up water and significantly raise water levels upstream as far as the ford near the end of Santa Clara Avenue. Simultaneous high tides and storms have a long history of causing floods in this area.

The creek that once wound through broad marshes has been forced into a narrow channel . Land is higher on all four sides. City-building covers most of the watershed with impermeable roofs or paving. The two channels that drain this area, particularly the culverts under Pierce and the freeways north of Pacific East Mall, have little freeboard at highest tides (photos available). There is general agreement that rising sea levels and more-intense storms as a result of global warming will increase flood risk.

Hydrologists cannot now predict the additive or synergistic effects of combined high tides and storm flows – even less so when they are limited by culverts. Thus, these effects are not reflected in current sea-level-rise planning and projection, including maps by ABAG and others.

**For these reasons, planning for capital projects and maintenance in El Cerrito’s Creekside and Central Parks, as well as possible improvements to the concrete channel west of Belmont (partly in El Cerrito) should be preceded by thoughtful, unified consideration of how future flooding may affect this area, and how such projects could help alleviate future flooding.**

A number of projects have been proposed piecemeal for Contra Costa County’s upcoming stormwater plan. These include “restoring” the concrete drainage channel along Belmont and two projects for the storm water ponds and Cerrito Creek creekside trail. In the past, there have been ideas for simultaneously improving lightly used Central Park and using it to help treat and retain storm water.

However, none of these should be undertaken without a unified and realistic understanding of local conditions and regulatory requirements, including potential floodwater heights from the combination of sea level rise, new storm intensity, and higher tides . Planning for this vulnerable area should be coordinated (a) with considerations other than parks (e.g. safety and property damage nearby) and (b) in concert with the City of Richmond.

In one example of projects that omit the consideration needed: It would be lovely to somehow “naturalize” the ugly concrete flood-control ponds in Creekside Park. However, several factors complicate such goals:

- More storage may be needed as sea levels rise and if storm intensity increases.
- The present ponds must be cleared of silt regularly by El Cerrito staff. If they are “naturalized,” how will this be done?

- Because the area is tidal, with two-way flow and a continual influx of sediment from the Bay, ordinary calculations of how flow will maintain a naturalized meandering channel don't apply. Downstream currents can't be counted on to either maintain meanders or clear sediment.
- Regulations may make it impossible or prohibitively expensive to remove sediment or encroaching vegetation (which fills waterways and catches sediment) if ponds are changed.

#### **5. Other miscellaneous:**

- El Cerrito should explore whether planting and maintenance could make an attractive water feature at the short section of channelized creek, commonly called "Fluvius innominatus," that runs along the Ohlone Greenway. This may be preferable to, and far cheaper than, seeking a grant to re-do or extend a past capital project that was then neglected due to lack of maintenance.
- El Cerrito should continue welcoming and assisting volunteer work in parks and open spaces, but the city cannot count on such help continuing indefinitely.

Friends of Five Creeks is confident that the approaches outlined above will enable these beautiful natural areas to continue providing enjoyment to residents of El Cerrito.