



Friends of Five Creeks

*Volunteers preserving and restoring watersheds of
North Berkeley, Albany, Kensington, south El Cerrito and Richmond since 1996
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June 17, 2024

Berkeley Transportation and Infrastructure Commission, via Noah Budnick
Srinivas Muktevi, Berkeley Public Works Supervising Civil Engineer, Storm Water Plan Project Director
Cc: Ron Nevels, City Engineer; Terrance Davis, Berkeley Public Works Director
Cc: Berkeley City Mayor and Council, Berkeley City Clerk
Cc: Berkeley Parks, Recreation, and Waterfront Commission, via Roger Miller; Berkeley Environment and Climate Commission, via Sarah Moore; Berkeley Disaster and Fire Safety Commission, via Keith May

Re: Comments on [Berkeley Storm Water Master Plan, Specification 22-11505-C](#)

This letter updates and supplements Friends of Five Creeks' May 24 comments to the Transportation and Infrastructure Commission on the \$1.9 million Berkeley Storm Water Master Plan, under development with Wood Rodgers, Inc., consultants ([Berkeley Specification 22-11505-C](#)).

As a volunteer group that has dealt with the challenges of Berkeley creeks and watersheds for 27 years, we continue to applaud the proposal's innovative and cost-saving elements, emphasis on accurate data and modeling, and promise of a prioritized and timely maintenance plan. A new plan is much needed.

We are distributing these comments widely because two aspects alarm us:

1. Critical work apparently is being performed and decisions made without (a) public or stakeholder information or input or (b) coordination with other affected city departments or commissions, including Parks, Recreation, and Waterfront; Disaster and Fire Safety; and Environment and Climate. These are the opposite of [Vision 2050's](#) goal of public engagement and planning done by departments in coordination, not in silos.
2. Important effects and recent research on climate change and sea-level rise must be included.

Item 3 lists other concerns that flow from these.

1. Lack of public, stakeholder, and other city department and commission input:

[Task 1.1 in the city's specification for the work](#) says, "Prior to commencing any work, the Wood Rodgers' Team will meet with the City and any other stakeholders. The purpose of this kickoff meeting is to clearly define the goals of the project, to establish an understanding of the City's needs, to determine the standards and policies that apply to the project, and to refine the project's scope of work and budget...." **This promised kickoff meeting has not been held. The department's schedule envisions no public meetings until February 2026, three months before approval.**

Wood Rodgers routinely holds these kickoff meetings. [Albany's contract for a new stormwater plan, signed in June 2024 \(task 1.2, p. 13\), has identical wording.](#) Albany's public works director has assured me that they plan to hold the meeting.

The public could not know that work was underway. Outreach to relevant commissions appears minimal to nonexistent. The city's web site offers nothing but the brief July 2023 consent item. The project has not appeared on the Transportation and Infrastructure Commission's agenda since before it was approved.

Friends of Five Creeks is a partner project of 501(c)3 Berkeley Partners for Parks

After repeatedly asking various staff members over months, Friends of Five Creeks discovered that a subcommittee existed only by speaking at public comment at the Transportation and Infrastructure Commission's May meeting. Outreach to other relevant commissions appears minimal to nonexistent. The Parks, Recreation, and Waterfront Commission (concerned with creeks and Aquatic Park) was informed in recent days by stakeholders; it now plans to discuss the project in July.

Public information and input are essential to governing a city. Residents need to know about unseen water and flood infrastructure – why it matters, how it works, and what residents' taxes and fees support. Berkeley urgently needs to update its aged and neglected system for handling storms and other urban runoff, and make key changes to deal with rising sea- and groundwater levels and larger storms. Informed, experienced stakeholders can offer important information and history to an understaffed Public Works Department with new leadership. **A stakeholder meeting should be held as soon as possible, before any important decisions are finalized. Ongoing communication channels should be announced and kept open.**

2. The Wood Rodgers proposal does not adequately deal with climate change.

A. The consultants' Berkeley proposal does not mention [rising groundwater levels – which current research shows are likely to have serious effects in the low-lying East Bay plain](#). Rising with sea level, not deterred by barriers or green infrastructure, this groundwater will increase flooding, decrease infiltration, and corrode and weaken the built environment. [Wood Rodgers' recent contract with Albany clearly addresses this](#) (Section 3.3. pp. 11-12), citing the study linked above.

B. Wood Rodgers' Albany contract promises to use recent climate information and models not included in Berkeley's proposal. In the Albany plan, "Pathways and LBNL's [Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory] completed Extreme Precipitation Study" (p. 12) are to be used to analyze how climate change may change intense storms. Tide and sea-level -rise data are to be based on "data sources highlighted in the Flood Risk and Sea Level Rise Adaptation Report, and the State of California *Sea Level Rise Guidance 2024 Science and Policy Update...*" (p. 12). The one-year gap between Berkeley's and Albany's contracts may explain these differences. But Berkeley needs the most current information in a plan likely to be used for 20-30 years in a fast-changing climate. As in Albany, this information should be used to determine **both** capacity deficiencies and high-priority capital improvements. It's worth noting that Albany hopes to also use the design storm that Wood-Rodgers is developing for Berkeley to make these calculations. **Berkeley must plan for climate change using use up-to-date inputs and methods .**

3. The comments below illustrate matters that stakeholders and other commissions and departments should be able to raise with consultants before decisions are made.

A. The Public Works Department schedule says that "Criteria Review and Recommendations" will be complete by July 12. All the above issues regarding climate change should be clarified in binding form before any such decisions.

B. The Public Works Department schedule says that inspection schedules will be final by July 26. Some inspections, especially of storm drains on private property, are likely to face issues and challenges. Stakeholders and commissioners should be able to weigh in on focus and adequacy.

C. **Aquatic Park depths (bathymetry) are to be surveyed between July 29 and Aug. 19.** Aquatic Park has three lagoons -- Wood Rodgers mentions only one. It is vital to measure the rapidly shallowing Middle/Model Yacht Basin, critical to flood protection. Data also must be easily comparable to bathymetry in the 2008-11 Aquatic Park Improvement Program, to show change over time.

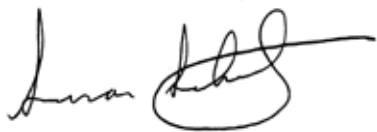
D. **Data collection is scheduled to be complete by Sept. 6** (except for vegetation management, below). **The design storm is to be decided by Sept. 13.** The design storm is basically how big a storm or range of storms the system should be able to handle. It is unacceptable to make these decisions with no public information or input, based on a document that does not mention more up-to-date information, at a time when changing climate is increasing the threat of much larger storms.

E. **A drone survey is scheduled December 2024 to January 2025 to measure vegetation and capacity in open creek channels – basically, private back yards.** At minimum, residents – including those in Albany and Kensington where creeks form Berkeley's borders – need notice and the ability to ask questions. Other attempts to survey have sometimes met stiff resistance. **If this drone survey is done, Berkeley should consult and share data with the Fire Department, appropriate commissions, and regional wildfire agencies .** Creek canyons, such as the deep Cerrito Creek canyon on Berkeley's northeast border, can funnel fire.

F. Friends of Five Creeks is delighted that lidar and other tools are to be used to model creek channels and flood plains for flood risk and perhaps needs for vegetation management (Wood Rodgers proposal p. 13). Managing vegetation on creek channels, however, requires considering erosion, slides, habitat, privacy, and fire hazard –as well as complex multi-agency permits. **Consultants and Public Works staff should work with other commissions, departments, and agencies to avoid contradictory or unworkable recommendations.**

These examples clearly show that this plan should be developed with both robust exchange of ideas, including with stakeholders, and the most current available information on climate change. We look forward to working with the city to create the plan it needs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan Schwartz", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Susan Schwartz, President, Friends of Five Creeks