

Passage of San Anselmo's Measure F: Gain or Loss?

by Laura Lovett

2024

In 2007, voters in the Ross Valley authorized a flood control fee to be assessed to each household. The fee was approved by a majority of voters and will be collected through 2027. The fee revenue is used to fund the Ross Valley Flood Protection and Watershed Program, the goal of which is to manage stormwater and reduce the damage from flooding during significant storms.

To date, approximately \$35 million has been collected and spent on items as diverse as the detention basin above Fairfax, purchase of Building Bridge #2 in San Anselmo, various bridge and culvert projects, and development of a detailed computer model of how creeks in the Ross Valley function. Additional grants amounting to \$20.2 million have been received to help fund further projects. \$18.7 million has been spent in the town of San Anselmo.

While a great deal has already been done, much of it may not be visible to residents: it is essential to complete costly engineering and feasibility studies first; permits are expensive and time-consuming to apply for; staff spent time applying for the \$20 million in grants received. These happen long before any construction takes place. In recent years, however, many San Anselmo residents have been feeling that a lot of money has been spent and that there is nothing to show for it.

Last year, town residents gathered signatures and placed Measure F on the 2024 March 5th election ballot. The Measure asked, "Shall an initiative measure be adopted to withdraw the Town of San Anselmo, including all parcels of land in Town, from the Marin County Flood Control and Water Conservation District Zone 9?" It passed with a majority vote.

The measure's proponents told voters that this would get them out of paying the fee going forward. However, fees must still be paid for work already committed and underway, which will take us to 2027. The town residents, along with the rest of the Ross Valley, will be paying fees until then.

One of the major items affecting the flow of water through San Anselmo has been the historical structures built over the creek as it passes through town, some of which have foundations within the creek flow channel. These, and the buildings' low walls, cause the water to back up, and they catch debris which further blocks water flow. Removal of these obstructions has been a major objective of the Flood Control District.

The county purchased 632–636 San Anselmo Avenue, which is known as Building Bridge #2, and removed the buildings in preparation for removing the concrete platform they sat on, and their supports in the creek bed. Then Covid changed everyone's lives, the work came to a halt, and the town started using the platform as an outdoor gathering spot. The county has now put the work back on schedule and this platform and its supports are due to be demolished next year. The passage of Measure F hasn't affected that timeline. Engineering studies show that removal of this obstruction will reduce the overall depth of future floods by as much as a foot and improve stream flow for fish migration. Many residents were angered by the closing of their gathering spot when the structure was deemed unsafe, and this anger spurred the voter rebellion.

In the end, the one clear thing achieved by Measure F was to remove San Anselmo from a seat on the Flood Zone 9 Advisory Board. San Anselmo councilmember Brian Colbert remarked that, "It's problematic that we lost our voice on the board and I regret that much of the information voters received was misleading."

What is most troubling about San Anselmo's choice to operate as a separate agent is that the Corte Madera Creek watershed flooding issues can only be successfully addressed if all towns along the waterway work together. The political actions of one town can jeopardize towns above and below them in the watershed. Corte Madera Creek is a single, interconnected stream drainage that a great many smaller creeks feed into. Decisions need to be made with the entire watershed in mind and in conjunction with all other affected parties, including those that can't vote on a local measure.

Supervisor Katie Rice said, “While we must respect voters’ wishes to remove San Anselmo from Zone 9, the fact is that the only way to address flood risk in Ross Valley is to work together. The District is trying to address potential impacts to the greater community. Progress has indeed been made and ultimately the work will provide real benefit to the communities of San Anselmo, Ross, and downstream.”

Colbert expressed a hope shared by many when he said, “The end of the flood fee provides a way to rethink how the individual communities engage with each other around solving the flooding issues.” We certainly hope to see this happen.

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