

Corte Madera Creek Flood Control Project Sandbagged

by Ann Thomas

2003

Completion of the Corte Madera Creek Flood Control project through Ross, a project at an impasse for three decades, is no closer to resolution than it was a year ago. And new considerations surface at every meeting that is held on the subject. Two significant new factors are 1) the Town of Ross's about-face on their long-standing demand that flood control work in Ross preserve the historic Lagunitas Bridge, and 2) a contraction in funding for the Army Corps of Engineers' project resulting from changes in federal priorities.

There are other considerations as well. There is still no design or even a firm agreement for a "locally preferred plan." Ross is still waiting for information from the Corps about how to deal with at-risk properties upstream of the Lagunitas Bridge. And environmental groups including Friends of Corte Madera Creek continue to maintain that reducing flood hazards downstream in a watershed needs to involve the entire watershed and should not be dealt with piecemeal.

Subsequent to the channelization of Corte Madera Creek through Kentfield in the late 1960s, public opposition, litigation and environmental concerns stopped the project's continuation through Ross. For the past 20 years a major consideration in designing a project has been Ross's insistence that, whatever is done, Lagunitas Bridge over the creek must be retained as is. A decision regarding the bridge is key in the project because the space under the bridge is a bottleneck that limits the channel's capacity. However, last November the Ross Town Council received a report on the bridge's structural integrity indicating that it is seismically unsafe with streambed soils susceptible to liquefaction— leading the Council to conclude the bridge should be replaced.

In addition, a proposal that was being considered to construct a covered bypass culvert from just above the Lagunitas Road Bridge to just below the upstream end of the concrete channel, in order to increase capacity at the bottleneck, has been dismissed by the Council due to the disruption its construction would create to downtown Ross.

The Town Council subsequently asked for a change in the resolution governing the project design and this amendment was approved at the April 30 meeting of the Flood Control Zone Nine Advisory Board, before a small audience in the Ross Town Hall meeting chambers. The Ross amendment withdraws its requirement that the present Lagunitas Bridge be retained and requests a project design which includes replacement of the existing bridge with a new one that replicates the appearance of the existing bridge as much as possible while also increasing the channel capacity under the bridge.

At the April 30 meeting the Zone Nine Board also heard a report from the new Corps project manager indicating a slowdown in the planning and funding. He said the Corps has reprogrammed \$48,000 in fiscal year 2003 funds from other Bay Area projects to keep the Corte Madera project moving, but that money would only cover about 15% of the design costs. There are no funds in the President's 2004 budget for the project, although Congresswoman Woolsey has asked for \$300,000 in the House markup version of the President's budget. It could be months before a fiscal year 2004 federal budget is approved.

The Corps' project manager, James Miller, also told the Zone Nine Board that the Corps would not cover costs for bridge replacement. He said the Corps routinely covers the cost of replacing railroad bridges but not traffic bridges. Ross officials had plans to meet with Caltrans representatives to discuss State funding possibilities for replacing the bridge as part of a seismic upgrade program.

At the April 30 meeting the Zone Nine Board also received resolutions from the town councils of Fairfax and San Anselmo requesting that the County Flood Control District seek nonstructural alternatives for completion of the Corte Madera Creek Flood Control Project.

Friends has consistently asked the Corps to use watershed-wide studies to integrate information about the creek channel through Ross and Kentfield with the upland part of the watershed. We believe that successful flood management requires looking at sediment sources and drainage and flow patterns throughout the creek system. Actions must be taken to improve fish passage through the existing concrete

channel, the fish ladder must be replaced, and any new stream alterations must not further jeopardize the viability of steelhead trout, coho salmon and other species that occupy the stream corridor. Coho salmon have not been seen in Corte Madera Creek since the early 1980s, but the stream is part of their historic range and we might be lucky enough to see them spawning again in Corte Madera Creek if we can work together to improve their habitat.

Any use of text and photographs for other than personal purposes is prohibited without permission from Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed

All photographs © 2004 Charles Kennard unless otherwise credited

Website design by Karen Peterson, San Anselmo

Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed
P.O. Box 415, Larkspur, California 94977 phone: (415) 457-6045 fax: (415) 457-6362
info@friendsofcortemaderacreek.org