

SFGate.com

Print This Article

Back to

Article

SFGate.com

Fault lines in Portola Valley Not just the San Andreas, but Sausal Creek and its ecological potential drives passions in Peninsula town

Sam Whiting, Chronicle Staff Writer

Saturday, September 13, 2008



Two lines lie buried beneath the new \$20 million Town Center in Portola Valley. One is the San Andreas Fault, the other is Sausal Creek. Nobody wants to see the fault rise up, but half the town would like to see the creek flow again. Half a creek is what they will get.

In what is either a marvel of civic compromise, a town's bending to ecological extremism or a show of force by the softball lobby, a 289-foot section of the creek will be uncovered to pursue its course. The other 341 feet will stay buried 7 feet under, in the concrete culvert through which it has flowed for 50 or 60 years.

"That's a good old fight we've been having for some time now," said Mayor Maryann Derwin.

The line of demarcation is a concrete head wall that opens onto a wide channel. After the first significant storm, water will gurgle up and meander through a meadow, then flow an additional 63 feet onto the property of an adjacent church.

"People don't even know there is a creek there," said Alex Von Feldt, co-chair of the Portola Valley Friends of Sausal Creek. Many don't care, or would have preferred to leave it buried rather than have a lawn truncated by a ditch, 38 to 72 feet wide, that will usually carry just enough water to interest mosquitoes.

The other side of the argument is that the Town Center complex is aspiring to the highest (platinum) Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating decreed by the U.S. Green Building Council. The pre-existing culvert would not affect the rating, but, as Von Feldt puts it, "it seems inconsistent to spend all the time and effort to build the latest and greatest cutting-edge green building and leave the creek in a concrete pipe."

Four years in the works

The Sausal Creek daylighting (moving a stream above ground) has been four years in the mulling and the making. The project is being led by environmental hydrologist Jorgen Blomberg, 39, a partner in the San Francisco firm Philip Williams & Associates, which specializes in ecosystem restoration.

The estimated cost to bring half of Sausal Creek back to where it ought to be is \$1.3 million. By the math of the project's opponents, that works out to \$4,498 per linear foot of waterway. By the math of the Friends of the Creek, it works out to \$86 a square foot to grade, bolster and plant 15,000 square feet of riparian corridor and upland meadow, and add two bridges and three concrete head walls while providing 100-year flood control. The money has to be raised privately, which is a tough nut when you consider that \$17 million has already been shaken free toward completion of the Town Center, which will be dedicated at 2 p.m. Sunday during Portola Valley's annual Blues & Barbecue for Open Space.

That project had its own controversy, starting with the fact that it was started at all. The same voices that wanted the culvert left alone thought the existing Town Center was good enough for government work, maybe with some steel braces added for earthquake protection. It had been built in the 1950s as Portola Valley School on property that included a network of unorganized natural channels in a grove of willows, hence the Spanish name *sausal*.

That problem was diverted into a pipe 5 feet in diameter and 630 feet long. Not as easily tamed was the main line of the San Andreas, which ran under second base of the school's baseball diamond. Over time, kids got so spooked that they were afraid to hit a double. After several decades of tremors without incident, except for the bumped heads during duck-and-cover drills, the school was closed in 1977 and the students dispersed to two other campuses in the district.

In the best deal since the purchase of Manhattan from the Dutch, the town bought the 11.5-acre site from the school district for \$120,000, or a little over \$10,000 an acre. The government settled into the decommissioned school buildings for a temporary stay that lasted 30 years, until the old Portola Valley School was demolished in December 2006.

Workshops were held and residents broken into six study groups to devise independent visions for the replacement Town Center. The creek was featured in five of the six designs. These were consolidated to three designs submitted to the Town Council. All three contained a portion of the creek, but the creek didn't make it onto the final plan. Cost, timing, liability concerns and required approval by state and federal agencies came into play.

"It got lost somewhere along the way," recalled friend of the creek Von Feldt, who was on the Town Center site design committee as a representative of the conservation commission. "Everybody said, 'We'll do it later on.' "

Creek boy to the rescue

"Later on" might have meant never if it weren't for Matt Stoecker, a son of the valley known locally as Creek Boy. For three years Creek Boy Stoecker, 33, has been a constant at council meetings, rising up to his full height of 6 feet, 4 inches and needling the representatives for trying to wash over the creek issue.

Stoecker's agenda is to get Stanford University to remove the dam on Searsville Lake, which will allow steelhead to swim from the bay up to their native spawning grounds. These grounds include Sausal

Creek, which has just one major blockage, the culverted stretch under Town Center, said Stoecker, who didn't mind pointing out the irony.

"My fellow council members were trying to swat him down as a little fly," recalled Mayor Derwin, who was brought around by a reading of "A River Runs Through It." "I thought, 'This is bull-. This is important.' "

It became more important after the fundraising was complete for the Town Center. In June, the money-tree sign at the entrance on Portola Road was shaded green to the tippy-top of \$20 million with the familiar proclamation "We Did It." At the same time, a banner asking people to "Dig Deep for the Creek" went up across town on Alpine Road.

At the annual Town Picnic, Creek Boy and the chairs of Friends of the Creek, Danna Breen, 54, and Von Feldt, 36, staffed an information booth, strategically located next to the pie baking contest, with a scale model of the creek project. Soon afterward, the Town Council green-lighted the daylighting project for completion this fall, even though the fundraising was a half million short of its \$1.3 million budget. (A matching grant of as much as \$200,000 has been offered by an anonymous resident until Oct. 1. www.sd-dd.com/sausal2/index.htm.)

It might have been another half million short if they'd been able to daylight the entire culvert. Derwin said there was never council support for that, and there certainly wasn't once the new diamond went into use at the end of May. The culvert starts behind home plate and runs in a northerly direction beneath the reclaimed redwood picnic tables and bleachers along the third base line.

Players in the adult softball league scoff at the project as too much money for a too-short creek that is too dry too much of the year. "Some people don't think a dry creek bed is beautiful," Derwin said. "But I do."

Parents argue that without the creek cutting up the property, they could add another sports field. There are so many little kids in town that Ormondale School has added a fifth class of kindergartners. Von Feldt has heard this argument. She has a kindergartner.

A place for kids to play

"They don't buy into the idea that a creek is a wonderful place for kids to play. They just see it as this muddy thing," Von Feldt said. And when it isn't dry or muddy, it will be raging.

"We've heard all the comments about children being swept downstream in a massive wave," Breen said, "and it just ain't gonna happen." What she and the other daylighters hope is gonna happen is that everybody in town will love the half creek, once they see it flowing. Then there will be enough support to get that ball field moved 50 feet toward Portola Road to be able to dig up the remaining 341 feet of pipe and finish the job.

"Some of us say, 'Someday we'll come back and do it all,' " Derwin said. "Then, if Searsville Dam came down, you could see steelhead in that creek."

E-mail Sam Whiting at swhiting@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/09/13/HOKP11GEQM.DTL>

This article appeared on page **F - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

[© 2008 Hearst Communications Inc.](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)