

# PRIORITY CONSERVATION AREA APPLICATION

## Benefits

### **Community Health and Recreation**

Cerrito Creek west of the Ohlone Greenway is nestled within high-density residential and mixed-use commercial zoning districts in the cities of Albany and El Cerrito, running underneath San Pablo Avenue and along the edge of the El Cerrito Plaza Shopping Center. In order to reduce reliance on the private automobile, both jurisdictions envision higher density development in these districts, which are well served by the public transportation infrastructure along San Pablo Avenue and at the El Cerrito Plaza BART Station. The cities have identified the need for multipurpose green spaces to support this increased density, understanding the potential impacts of increased urbanization on human health, environmental conditions, comfort and sense of community. An existing green corridor along Cerrito Creek both provides existing open space and makes it possible to reach, and move between, Creekside Park, the large Albany Hill open space (already a Priority Conservation Area) and the regional Ohlone Greenway multiuse path, as well as two popular shopping centers, condominiums at the foot of Albany Hill, shopping and bus routes on San Pablo Avenue and the El Cerrito Plaza BART Station.

A diverse group of people enjoy Creekside Park and Albany Hill Park, fostering interaction, a strong sense of community, and opportunities to play. The active and passive recreation provided by the path, trails through Albany Hill, and open grass fields in El Cerrito's Creekside Park attract families with young children, runners, elderly people doing tai chi, bird watchers, meditators, teens hanging out, and many others. A Cerrito Creek Bay Trail Connector Study was completed in 2004 to understand what was needed to connect the Creekside path to the Bay Trail, a connection that would greatly increase Albany and El Cerrito's access to the Bay Trail and the active recreation opportunities it provides.

The accessibility of Albany Hill, made easier by the Creekside trails, help neighboring cities curb emissions by providing residents with opportunities to hike, bike, play, take in the views, interact with nature and simply enjoy some peace and quiet without having to get in their cars.

Well over 1000 volunteers of all ages have worked along this creek corridor since 2000. They range from elementary-school students to the senior citizens. Friends of Five Creeks, Friends of Albany Hill, and El Cerrito Green Teams continue to work cooperatively along the corridor, fostering teamwork, cooperation, and connections with each other and with the earth. This stewardship fosters a sense of pride and builds community, which has important impacts on residents' well-being and quality of life.

### **Wildlife Habitat**

Cerrito Creek is an important part of the unusually intact urban "ecological island" already protected in the Albany Hill PCA. Albany Hill, with Cerrito Creek at its northern foot, constitutes a geologically and biologically unique environmental island that provides wildlife habitat and vegetation amidst residential and commercial neighborhoods, freeways and roads. The creek's riparian corridor

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supports this biodiversity and transitions from freshwater pools and riffles to brackish and tidal at the foot of Albany Hill, providing even more variety of ecological niches.

Wildlife using the creek include: coyote, deer, and raccoon; red-tail and Coopers hawks, owls, and kestrels; great egrets, snowy egrets, great blue herons, and night herons; kingfishers, cormorants, mergansers, and mallards; and, a wide variety of songbirds including warblers, finches, sparrows, nuthatches, chickadees, flycatchers, and woodpeckers. The many fishing birds are evidence of healthy populations of stickleback, California roach, and other small fish. Pacific chorus frogs sing along the creek in the spring.

Where it is aboveground, the creek corridor is edged by a healthy riparian forest of willow, alder, Western sycamore, buckeye, box elder, and other native trees, most planted during restoration efforts of the last 20 years. The willow grove at the mouth of Middle Creek is one of the few remaining East Bay “sausals,” and its dense trees and understory of native blackberry and cow parsnip provide habitat for many songbirds.

Geologically, Albany Hill is a unique isolated “turtleback,” a remnant of hills that once ran diagonally across what now is the down-dropped basin holding San Francisco Bay. Albany Hill is the only significant East Bay topographic feature next to the Bay and in the path of sea winds blowing through the Golden Gate. As a result, it is one of the few East Bay havens for plants normally found in much cooler areas: Nootka rose (*Rosa nutkana*), stinging phacelia (*Phacelia nemoralis*), and coast horkelia (*Horkelia californica ssp. californica*). These thrive along the creek corridor. Spared development, the hill and the creek retain an amazing variety of habitats and life. The 135 native plants reported from the area include two orchid species, three different roses, and seven ferns.

The willow marsh, or sausal, at the confluence of Middle and Cerrito Creeks is shown on the earliest maps; its gnarled and twisted willows also attest to its age. The oak forest on the hill’s north slope, with its rich understory, including hazelnut and blue elderberry, is little changed from the days of the Ohlone. The grassy meadows on the north slope running down to the creek harbor native grasses and many native wildflowers important to Native Americans, including soap plant, yarrow, and ookow. The Monarch butterflies that use the eucalyptus on the summit as a migration and winter refuge flit along the creek.

The area also has great historical importance. Grinding rocks, as well as the shell deposits including human remains, encountered during sewer construction in 1998, attest to the site’s long use by Native Americans. The manufacture of dynamite for California’s mines culminated in a huge 1905 explosion that gouged the hill, leaving scars visible today. A mariner’s landmark shown on the earliest Spanish maps, the hill also provided the name of the adjacent city of El Cerrito (meaning “the little hill”). Cerrito Creek was the boundary between two major land grants (Castro and

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Peralta), and thus became the boundary between Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.

#### **Climate and Resilience**

Cerrito Creek originally flowed into a broad tidal marsh west of San Pablo Avenue, but it was straightened, narrowed, filled and covered with houses in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This early development, along with additional construction like the Pacific East Mall built in 1969, has been subject to continual flooding since. The City of El Cerrito constructed concrete detention ponds as an attempt to address this problem, but when high tides, which are visible at the ford, and storms coincide some properties and Creekside Park are still subject to flooding. Sea-level rise will only increase flood potential and a healthy, intact creek helps to reduce flood risks.

Several remaining pieces of the creek were placed in culverts and concrete channels, reducing their stormwater retention potential and increasing flood risks. In 2001, the Cities of Albany and El Cerrito, with funding from a state grant program, constructed a project to restore the creek from Talbot to Kains along the south side of the El Cerrito Plaza Shopping Center. The project resulted in a wider, more meandering creek corridor that provides environmental benefits and reduces flood risks.

The native willows, sycamores, alders, and other trees along the Cerrito Creek Corridor are important in El Cerrito's tree canopy, where such riparian forest is rare. Opportunities to complete the corridor could increase this canopy, for example at a proposed condominium project on the south side of the El Cerrito Plaza Shopping Center bordering the Ohlone Greenway, which includes plans to "daylight" the creek. Existing trees along the creek corridor help reduce the urban heat island effect of the large expanse of paving and roofs at El Cerrito Plaza, Pacific East Mall, and the Albany condominiums south of the creek.

#### **Water supply and water quality**

In developed cities, year-round creeks adjacent to significant areas of upland habitat are uncommon. Cerrito Creek and adjacent Albany Hill merit conservation as examples of what a watershed can be. The green riparian buffer which edges the shopping malls and major streets filters and helps purify water runoff, reducing the quantity of typical urban pollutants that run into the creek: oil, gas, heavy metals, and soaps – are reduced.

Prior to the Cities' investment in the Creekside trail, creek restoration and park project, people regularly pushed shopping carts, trash and other litter into the creek, but this has been greatly reduced by the presence of well-maintained green areas along the creek.