

Vegetation Management at Albany's Creekside Park and relevant adjacent areas

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Goals for vegetation management

It is possible to pursue many different goals in vegetation management for the Creekside Park area. This memo focuses on goals that seem both essential and do-able for the City of Albany:

- Minimizing flood risk
- Minimizing fire risk
- Minimizing illegal camping (and resultant garbage)
- Preserving and enhancing park access and use
- Increasing actual and perceived safety.

Other laudable goals include plant and animal biodiversity; preservation and increase of genetically local natives; and general attractiveness (views, flowers). These should be kept in mind, and the city probably should work with any volunteers who choose to pursue them. But history suggests that Albany probably lacks the expertise or political will to seriously carry out such goals. For example, Albany spent large sums of mitigation money pursuing biodiversity and genetically local native plantings (after rebuilding of the creekside sewer line in 1998-99). Albany abandoned the project when the mitigation funds ran out; most of the money was wasted. It seems wise to look for limited, practical, and sustainable policies.

This memo deals with problems, not who should be responsible for fixing them. As will become clear below, responsibility is unsettled. There is supposedly an informal agreement that Albany and El Cerrito each take care of their own side, but actual practice is inconsistent – El Cerrito has cut blackberries on both sides, and Albany has removed fallen willows rooted on the north bank. The city staffs do not appear to communicate with one another. In law, any property owner that causes a flood is responsible for all damage upstream. However, neither the state-owned Orientation Center nor the condominiums at Pierce, which own both banks of parts of Cerrito Creek, do any maintenance, and I do not believe they reimburse for work that is done.

Geographic areas of concern

In terms of vegetation management, the following areas have distinctive needs, as discussed below:

1. Cerrito Creek from the Orientation Center upstream to San Pablo, both sides of creek.
2. The meadow and creekside vegetation west of the Orientation Center and east of Middle Creek.
3. The willow grove at the confluence of Middle and Cerrito Creeks.
4. The thickly vegetated banks of Middle Creek upstream from the willow grove.
5. The grassy meadow areas at the foot of Albany Hill including the service road.
6. The Cerrito Creek bank, from the service road to creek edge.

1. Cerrito Creek from the Orientation Center upstream to San Pablo.

Ownership: This is not part of Creekside Park, but it may be practical to consider this area's vegetation-management needs in the same document and context.

From San Pablo at least to Adams Street, I believe that both sides of the creek are in Albany, and most is property of the Orientation Center for the Blind (that is, the State of California). The City of El Cerrito paid for and maintains the overlook at Adams Street and the creekside walkway on the north bank.

Problems: The major problems in this area are evergreen thornless blackberry at San Pablo (flood potential) and general overgrowth (encourages camping near Adams Street).

Flood risk: Close to San Pablo, evergreen thornless blackberries grow on both sides of the steep bank, particularly on the south. These easily span the narrow creek in one growing season. The north side property owner has grown too old to trim them as he did before. Friends of Five Creeks has sometimes cut and pulled tall weeds (fennel, hemlock, etc.) and cut blackberries, and the City of Albany has cut the vegetation in some years, but neither is consistent. The Orientation Center owns the property.

In the winter of 2009-10, interlaced blackberries had blocked the lower 2/3 of the culvert, causing water to back up upstream from San Pablo. At the creekside apartment building east of Kains in Albany, the garage flooded and the top beam of the retaining wall floated downstream. F5C volunteers cut the blackberries twice, clearing the culvert. (We also alerted Albany, but whoever came didn't do the job.)

The alternatives appear to be to (a) cut the blackberries yearly, reliably and forever, or (b) dig them out by the roots, put erosion-control cloth on the banks, and re-plant. Digging of re-sprouts will have to continue for one or two years more. Paid workmen generally will not dig deeply or thoroughly enough.

Downstream at Adams Street, some blackberries remain on the south bank (Orientation Center property). F5C continues to gradually shrink this patch, but any hired contractor should dig them, too. This is best done in late summer; erosion-control cloth should be in place in October.

Willows sometimes fall into the creek. They need trimming or removal if they are leaning dangerously (best done in late summer or fall) and occasional emergency removal.



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Left, blackberries at Adams Street, 2004. Right, after blackberry removal and planting of natives.

Visibility, camping, perceived and real safety: In the past there were major camps along the creek behind Old West Gun Room. By removing blackberries, establishing lower native vegetation, and repeated clearing, Friends of Five Creeks cleaned these out. Camping can be expected to resume if the area becomes too overgrown.

For visibility, the willows on both banks and the elderberry on the north bank need regular trimming. This is done from time to time by El Cerrito, Albany, or F5C. There also is a need to check for passion vine, which can provide cover for camps, and any re-sprouting blackberry.

Other: There is a small amount of poison oak above Adams Street. Seeds from invasives, particularly nasturtium and passion vine, wash downstream and become established.

2. Meadow and creekside vegetation west of the Orientation Center and east of Middle Creek

Ownership and access: The meadow east of Middle Creek and south of Cerrito Creek is part of Creekside Park, but it can only be reached by fording at least one creek. Thus, aside from attractive views from the popular creekside walkway on the north bank, use is almost entirely by kids and teens.

Lack of access makes vegetation management difficult. (For example, F5C leaves weeds in a heap to rot, which can itself be a fire hazard.) Boy Scouts have offered to build a bridge across Middle Creek, but residents of the apartment across Cerrito Creek would almost certainly object, because a major use probably would be teenagers partying. The previous head of the Orientation Center was not interested in access for his clients (e.g. for a native-plant garden with scented plants). The new head might be .

There is an easement for sewer repair and fire from Adams along the former street edging the creek, through the Orientation Center grounds. When the sewer was rebuilt in 1998-99, there was an understanding that a trail would be open here, but that never happened. The Albany Fire Department may have access.



Weeding meadow east of Orientation Center, reachable only by fording creek.

Problems: Fire risk. There has been some camping in the past, but F5C has not seen active camps in the years it has worked there. By about 2008, when F5C began work, the meadow was overrun by tall weeds which became dangerously dry in summer: fennel, hemlock, radish, mustard, bristly oxtongue, Italian thistle, cheeseweed, etc. The City of Albany's contractors mowed too late and not often enough to prevent seed set. Three years of pulling and digging these weeds has greatly reduced their incidence, but they are not eliminated, and if F5C stopped the meadow would quickly revert to tall weeds.

Other: Ivy at the base of the large sycamores threatens these trees. Shelterbelt did a major first cutting of the big stems, and F5C has been gradually rolling ivy back on the ground. But it would go back up the trees if left alone. A small infestation of bindweed also threatens trees and can send seed downstream if not controlled; F5C does this. Cape ivy on the south bank can break off and float downstream, or send seed downstream, starting an infestation that can smother all vegetation. Because the cape ivy dominates the very steep bank below the Orientation Center, control does not seem realistic. Blackberries (thorny) and other weeds on the bank are mostly aesthetic problems; F5C is reducing them.

3. Willow grove at the confluence of Middle and Cerrito Creeks.

Ownership and history: This grove, part of Albany's Creekside Park, appears on 1850s maps. It is close to the Native American grinding rocks, and the 1991 plan considered it sensitive habitat (willow groves welcome some nesting riparian birds, but usually have almost no understory). Although this depression probably used to be wetter, it has not been even temporarily marshy in at least 10 years. Urban runoff almost certainly has cut Middle Creek deeper, even more so after the old sewer line that served as a dam at the creek mouth was broken up in 1999 to create the fish ladder (the waterfall-like present creek mouth). This would have lowered the water table. Middle Creek also probably was larger in the past, before Blackberry Creek was piped off into the Marin culvert.

Problems: Camping, access, safety: When F5C began working in the area about 2005, the grove was completely inaccessible due to thorny blackberry and cape ivy. We have removed these, controlled other weeds (radish, fennel, hemlock, etc.) and established cow parsnip and a few other natives.



Left, clearing blackberries in Middle Creek willow grove, 2008. Right, grove after clearing, in fall.

Camping is a recurring problem that must be watched for, particularly on the southeast, where the adjacent blackberries limit visibility (see next section). F5C is not seeking to extend the cleared area up Middle Creek, largely due to poison oak. Although cape ivy seems to be eradicated, the blackberries must be cut and dug regularly to keep them from taking over again.

4. Middle Creek banks upstream from the Middle Creek willow grove.

Ownership, access: The downstream portion is in Creekside Park on both sides of the creek. At some point upstream, one or both banks may belong to the Orientation Center or Adams Street homeowners.

Access is via informal trails along Middle Creek from the service road (through the willow grove), beaten through the blackberries and poison oak, from back yards on Adams Street, or via a gate behind the Orientation Center. The bank below the trail from Madison Street is steep.

Problems: Flood control, camping. Overgrown vegetation in the upstream portions has caused flooding, e.g. in the winter of 2009-10. The blackberry thicket adjoining the willow grove is frequently used by illegal campers, who sometimes leave large amounts of debris. (There also is a longstanding teen gathering spot, often with a bed or sofa, upstream from the willow grove.)

Because these are thorny blackberries, removal would be significantly easier than with thornless ones. They re-sprout much less after the roots are dug. But they are growing with a lot of poison oak. The blackberries have some recreational value (they taste good).

Thinning or clearing should maintain shade over the creek, which is potential steelhead habitat. If clearing made portions of the creek sunny, it would be easy to plant a few willow poles.

5. The grassy meadows at the foot of Albany Hill

Open grassy areas extend from the east end of the sewer service road at Middle Creek to the condominium gate, and up the hill to the oak forest (the forest is not considered in this memo). The Native American grinding rocks are in this meadow, south of the willow grove. Significant shell-midden deposits lie beneath it, although they have been badly disrupted by construction of two sewer lines.

Ownership, Use: This is the most used part of Creekside Park (and probably of all of Albany Hill Park), with strollers, dog-walkers, birdwatchers, practitioners of meditation or martial arts, geocachers, teens gathering at the benches or in the big buckeye, commuters and shoppers from the condominiums crossing at the ford, some bicyclists who carry bikes across the ford, and the occasional drunk. The grassy lower slopes of the hill were used by generations of Albany kids for sledding (on cardboard). Two years ago, dirt bikers dug major gashes across the slope, ruining this sport. The view greatly enhances enjoyment of El Cerrito's more urban Creekside Park (with table, children's playground, and popular creekside trail). As a practical matter, the two Creekside Parks function as a single park (read reviews on Yelp, for example), and many if not most of the people using El Cerrito's Creekside Park live in Albany, particularly in the condos west of Albany Hill.

Problems: Fire risk, access, actual and perceived safety.

For some years, Albany paid Shelterbelt to encourage native grasses here with seeding and mowing. This failed. When the mitigation money ran out, the area quickly grew up in tall weeds (fennel, hemlock, Italian thistle, cheeseweed, radish, mustard, bristly oxtongue, etc.) which were not mowed early or often enough to prevent their setting more seed. They also became quite dry. Until mowing, the area was to all practical purposes unusable for park purposes. Tall weeds and the blackberry that blocked visibility from the north bank made people feel unsafe. Illegal campers were fairly common.

Since 2005, Friends of Five Creeks has pulled and dug these tall weeds and prevented them from setting seed. They are now both scarce and under control, except in the wide meadow area immediately east of the condominiums (condo property). The area is usable year-round. If we stopped, it presumably would revert, but it is hard to say how long this would take.

Other: It is worth noting that although the Fire Department has access to this area through the condominium driveway, they are not willing to bring vehicles onto the service road in wet weather. This has serious implications for safety and rescue. When a man slipped into the storm-swollen creek on the south bank on January 24, 2008, it took more than 20 minutes to get to him – Albany police and fire walked in from the condominium gate. (See F5C's Jan. 25, 2008, letter to the Albany Council, Manager, Parks Director, and Parks Commission.) Albany Fire has in the past suggested trying to firm the surface of the road with wood chips, but this would just suppress the grass and lead to more weeds. One solution might be pavers that allow grass to grow through them, and that could be removed if the sewer needed work. Another solution would be a bridge over Cerrito Creek.

Lack of vehicle access also means no trash pickup and no garbage cans. Teens (and drunks) leave their trash. F5C picks it up, but not regularly.



Ce *Left, weeds in Creekside Park meadow, 2006. Right, meadow from El Cerrito's Creekside Park, 2011.*

6. Cerrito Creek banks west of Middle Creek, sewer service road down to water.

Ownership and history: This is the most complicated part of this memo and of vegetation management.

In the area of Creekside Park, both sides of Cerrito Creek are in El Cerrito. Downstream, both sides are in Richmond. Thus, both sides are in Contra Costa County. The condominiums in Albany own a long, narrow parcel in Contra Costa County that includes part of their driveway as well as both creek banks, extending from Pierce Street to well east of their rear fence. Albany has a recent survey of this parcel.

When the condominiums were built, they were required to provide a trail easement along the creek to the park. However, Albany accepted an easement that is either in the creek or on a cliff-like bank. The present narrow trail running east from Pierce is not on the easement, although under common law it probably cannot be closed due to long public use. The condos, which do no maintenance, in the past have threatened to close it in an attempt to force Albany to take ownership of the long parcel.

Historically, Cerrito Creek meandered well north of its present narrow channel, in a tidal marsh that extended from Albany Hill to the other side of Central Avenue. This marsh was gradually filled (by a slaughterhouse and garbage dump, among other uses) and the creek was pushed into a narrow channel against the hill. The resulting neighborhood flooded, especially as impermeable surfaces covered the growing cities upstream – runoff from Berkeley, Albany, El Cerrito, Kensington, and Richmond flows through this area. Tides rise and fall as far up as the ford opposite Santa Clara, so flooding is particularly likely when storms and high tides coincide. In 1969, Richmond allowed the commercial area west of this neighborhood (now Pacific East Mall) to be filled higher than the neighborhood. To alleviate the growing flood problem, El Cerrito built the present retaining wall and flood-control ponds that same year. While the ponds lessen the floods, they do not prevent them. (The ponds also were intended to be a summer



Left, Cerrito Creek at ford opposite Santa Clara in 2004. Right, F5C's first blackberry removal, same area, 2005. Blackberries were up to where the person in the tree is pulling them down.

swimming hole – hence the summer dam footings roughly opposite Belmont. This was prevented when liability raised its ugly head.)

At some time, evergreen thornless blackberries were planted along the bank of Cerrito Creek, presumably to control erosion. However, these blackberries send out long canes that span the creek. This slows water and traps debris, worsening flooding in El Cerrito and Richmond. The dense thickets also trap silt, narrowing the flood channel.

Richmond staff cleared the channel yearly until about 2004, when the crew was laid off. About the same time, Friends of Five Creeks finished digging out the blackberries at Pacific East Mall and began digging them on the Albany side, so this has not had a drastic effect. Before 1998, El Cerrito also periodically cut the blackberries.

When the old, leaky sewer line along the south bank of Cerrito Creek was replaced in 1998-9, the bank was cleared except for a few large willows. Albany used mitigation money to try to establish natives. Although willows, buckeyes, and some shrubs and wildflowers survived, when the mitigation money ran out, Albany abandoned the project. The blackberries, which can advance 10 feet in a year, rapidly took over again. By 2005, when Friends of Five Creeks turned their attention to the Albany side of Creekside Park, the blackberries were 10 feet high along the south bank, extending to the edge of the service road.

With some initial cutting of the blackberries paid for by the City of Albany, F5C has been digging out 50-100 feet of blackberry yearly, establishing natives in their place. Clearing has been done in discontinuous chunks in case erosion became a problem. (It has not.) F5C hopes to continue until all the blackberry is gone, in perhaps 4-5 years. Digging re-sprouts will be needed for many more years.

Problems: Flood control, access, camping, perceived and real safety.



First and second rounds of digging roots of evergreen thornless blackberry. Other steps: initial cutting, putting down erosion control cloth, planting natives (several rounds), third and later rounds of digging.

Flood control: Removing most of the evergreen thornless blackberry along Cerrito Creek (which F5C began in 2001 at Pacific East Mall) appears to have lessened flooding. But until the blackberry is really all gone, quitting would mean that sooner or later, it would come back.

As an alternative, twice-yearly cutting plus diligent search for runners along the ground perhaps could contain the blackberry, but it is doubtful that this would happen. Trimmed canes and twigs also should be removed (very difficult in a thicket), because they readily root and form new plants.

Getting rid of evergreen thornless blackberry (*Rubus ulmifolius*) is significantly harder than getting rid of the familiar thorny Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus discolor*). The plants appear to re-sprout from much smaller root fragments in soil. In addition, on Cerrito Creek, roots are often very deep; digging roots out of the steep, rocky fill below the service road can be difficult to impossible; and some roots at the base of trees are inaccessible. (Some of these are still re-sprouting at Pacific East Mall, after a decade.) About three years of fairly intensive digging plus conscientious follow-up for many years are required.

Although F5C intends to continue until it blackberry is all gone, a vegetation management plan should consider the possibility that this will not happen, as well as maintenance after the blackberry is gone.

Willows are another potential flood issue, though a minor one. Cerrito Creek is swept by floods, and creekside willows topple into it (this is what willows do). Both Albany and F5C have had to remove several recently, including some deliberately broken by vandals. For the sake of habitat and recreation, it is desirable to have some downed logs in the creek, as well as trees that cross the creek. Thus, we have left partly downed willows across the creek both upstream and downstream from El Cerrito's Creekside Park. Generally, there probably are too many young willows very close to the creek. The most precarious should be removed and additional sprouts discouraged.

Access, camping, perceived and real safety:

F5C's removing the blackberry thickets and persistent cleanup at Pacific East Mall and in Albany seems to have eliminated illegal camping along Cerrito Creek's floodplain flats for now. If the blackberry came back, camping presumably would, too. Camps are a definite deterrent to park use, and campers leave debris that washes to the Bay.

Visibility – the fact that one can be seen from across the creek – is another big factor in the recent marked increase in use of Albany's Creekside Park. Other factors are the steps up the creek bank, benches, and a generally kempt appearance (all due to F5C). Many families bring children to play in the creek. Besides the ford opposite Santa Clara, the summer-dam area is particularly popular – it's easy to cross there in summer, and kids love to jump from the north dam footing across the creek. Obviously, none of this was possible when the whole creek was an impenetrable blackberry thicket.

A vegetation-management plan should include keeping visibility and easy access to at least portions of the creek bank. It also is desirable that parts of the creek bank be hard to reach and densely grown, for habitat. This entails considering which areas or what proportion should be open, and how to keep too-tall or too-dense vegetation from getting established there.

Upstream on the north bank below El Cerrito's creekside walkway, where (Himalayan) blackberry removal was simpler and revegetation began in 2006, low vegetation including natives has become fairly stable, with decreasing maintenance needs. But the lower banks and flat along the creek may never have truly stable vegetation. Annual flood bring seeds and fragments from upstream; tidal influence, which extends to the ford at Santa Clara, brings them from farther down. Significant numbers of weeds can invade established plant communities – two recent examples on Cerrito Creek are velvet grass (*Holcus lanatum*) and pellitory (*Parietaria* spp.) Both cause allergic reactions in a fair number of people. Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*) and pepperweed (*Lepidium latifolium*), both found on the creek, can crowd out virtually all other vegetation. It is difficult to say whether in the long run, without continued volunteer effort, anything but mowing could keep parts of the creek bank accessible.

Coyote brush and willow along the narrow trail north of the condominium fence also need regular and fairly severe trimming, or removal, so that the trail feels safe. (An aside: For safety it may be worth extending the top-of-bank railing farther east along the portion of creek bank that is very steep.)

Other:

Although it probably is not practical to use only genetically local plant material, in revegetation some attention should be paid to trying not to swamp local genetic material. In particular, F5C believes it is important not to plant stock that could cross with plants distinctive to the "ecological island" that is Albany Hill, such as Nootka roses (*Rosa nutkensis*). This is less important for species whose seeds or fragments would normally be brought from afar by floods, winds, or birds.

As mentioned above, habitat is important. Nesting for songbirds, perches for kingfishers, places where night herons can sleep, pools where herons and egrets can fish, vegetated areas of the stream where fish can hide from herons and egrets, sunny banks for dragonflies, flowers for butterflies, deer lies – all are desirable. However, given the changing nature of the vegetation and the creek itself (bars and levels of incision change, trees fall, etc.) it does not seem practical to try to plan these things in any detail.



Waves of invasives can overwhelm even established vegetation.

Far left, in 2005 bindweed was overwhelming even blackberry in some areas. Left, tarps had to be kept on for three years to control it. Even now, it recurs.

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