

Seven Hills Ranch and the Walnut Creek Channel

Seven Hills Ranch is bordered on the west by Walnut Creek, but it is unrecognizable as a creek due to a massive amount of concrete that converted it from a natural water stream into a concrete channel. It may not seem believable, but 70 years ago you could fish in downtown Walnut Creek (the city), where Broadway Plaza is now. Anadromous fish species like steelhead and chinook salmon would swim upstream. Now, they only get to the first drop structure.

The demise of Walnut Creek as a natural creek began in the early 1950s with the construction of Broadway Plaza. It continued with the construction of the concrete channel, several massive drop structures (aka death traps), and concluded in the early 1990s with the construction of the San Ramon bypass. The only purely natural section of Walnut Creek is when it emerges from underneath Broadway Pointe in the City of Walnut Creek and flows through Civic Park. It is about ½ mile in length.

The Contra Costa Flood Control and Water Conservation District (FCWCD) is responsible for maintaining the concrete and earthen channel. In 2009, the District completed a 50-year plan for the Walnut Creek Watershed, the largest watershed in Contra Costa County. One of the goals of that plan is to naturalize the creek, when possible. Due to development that has occurred since the concrete channel was constructed, the only remaining place where significant naturalization can occur is as it passes Seven Hills Ranch. There is nearly ½ mile of creek channel that flows on the western boundary of Seven Hills Ranch.

We divide Walnut Creek into the Lower, Middle and Upper Sections. The FCWCD is restoring Lower Walnut Creek through a \$20 million project that will, among other things, restore salt water tidal flats. The Walnut Creek Watershed, acting through various friends of the creek groups, volunteers, and with the support of the Contra Costa Resource Conservation District and the FCWCD, is working to remove invasive plants and restore native plantings in the upper section of the watershed. Seven Hills Ranch is located in the critical middle section, and it has been very heavily modified section by the concrete channels and the earthen channels further downstream.

The proposed development eliminates any possibility of naturalizing the creek, creating a small wetland to complement the natural lagoon at Heather Farm Park, and moving from a one-dimensional concrete facility to something that provides environmental benefits for fish and wildlife and provides the natural cooling of a creek in an era of global warming.

There is a lot of other work that needs to be done to restore the creek. However, reserving at least a 200' strip on the west side of Seven Hills Ranch from development to enable creek restoration is an essential element. Some of the other action items include:

- converting the two large drop structures where salmon still gather to allow fish passage and to eliminate the certain death for anyone who ventures into the creek, as has happened since adoption of the 50- year plan.
- creating a low-flow channel so that the summer water flow from San Ramon Creek flows directly into Walnut Creek and not down the concrete bypass channel,
- removing a swath of concrete from the bottom of the concrete channel for its entire length, are among the action items that need to happen to restore the creek, and
- creating a fish ladder or similar structure for the large drop structure on Las Trampas Creek in downtown Walnut Creek.