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Work begins on San Jose flood control project bankrolled by federal stimulus money

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The federal spigot from President Barack Obama's stimulus bill opened in Silicon Valley on Thursday, as dignitaries gathered in East San Jose to break ground on a flood-control project along Lower Silver Creek near Reid-Hillview Airport.

Driven by \$18 million in new stimulus funds, crews will start work this week on the formerly stalled project, creating 700 construction jobs over the next two years.

In addition to celebrating a public works effort, the event also had political overtones.

Similar events have been held in recent weeks around the nation as the Obama administration tries to blunt criticism from Republicans in Congress that the White House isn't spending the \$787 billion in stimulus funding fast enough.

Lower Silver Creek flood protection

Officials broke ground Thursday on a project to provide flood protection to Lower Silver Creek. From 2002 to 2006, crews completed flood control work from I-680 to Coyote Creek. Now they will work to extend protections farther, from I-680 eastward, toward Lake Cunningham.



Source: Santa Clara Valley Water District

"This is about rebuilding the economy," said U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who spoke at the event near Ocala Middle School.

Pointing to dozens of students who looked on, he said, "When these youngsters see their government investing in their community, and the flood protection and trails that this will bring, they understand that we are making an investment in them."

The work is designed to double the carrying capacity of Lower Silver Creek during heavy winter rains, reducing the risk of floods. Significant flooding occurred along the creek in 1952, 1955, 1958, 1967, 1982, 1983 and 1986.

With the new work, 3,800 homes and businesses in East San Jose will have protection against a 100-year

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flood — one so strong it only has a 1 percent chance of happening in any year. Currently, the area needing work only has protection against a 20-year flood.

Lower Silver Creek flows nearly five miles from Lake Cunningham to downtown San Jose, where it empties into Coyote Creek, which in turn flows into San Francisco Bay at Alviso.

The flood control work was first envisioned in 1979, but it was delayed for years by lack of funding. More recently, it has sat half-finished for the past two years.

In 2006, crews completed work on 2.4 miles of the creek from Interstate 680 west to Highway 101 and Watson Park. That work cost \$77 million and took six years. They carved back its banks 50 to 100 feet. They planted oaks, willows and other native plants in the new channel and built three large pedestrian bridges, along with new flood walls.

But funding dried up and work stopped, so the rest of the creek couldn't be completed.

"Now the project has been given new life," said Tony Estremera, a board member of the Santa Clara Valley Water District, which is overseeing the work.

To finish the remaining two miles of the creek upstream from I-680 to Lake Cunningham Park will cost an estimated \$78 million. Thursday's \$18 million is a down payment that will upgrade perhaps a mile between the interstate and Story Road. The remaining \$60 million has not been secured. The project also will include a new pedestrian bridge at Doris Avenue and changes to Lake Cunningham Park's landscape that will allow it to hold more water if the lake overflows in big storms.

The stimulus money was delivered through the

Natural Resources Conservation Service, an arm of Vilsack's USDA.

Vilsack met earlier Thursday in Morgan Hill with farmers and leaders of the United Farm Workers union. He wore a red UFW button on his suit lapel. After the flood control event, he sidestepped questions about whether he thought reduced water allocations to San Joaquin Valley farmers, the city of Los Angeles and Santa Clara County from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta this year were caused more by the current drought or by the federal Endangered Species Act.

"That's a question that would be better directed to (Interior) Secretary (Ken) Salazar," he said. "I'm going to make sure that USDA programs get administered to help farmers."

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