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Santa Clara Valley Water District approves project to widen Guadalupe River at Alviso

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Ending nine years of study and passionate debate about the future of San Jose's waterfront, the Santa Clara Valley Water District on Tuesday voted to approve a \$6 million project to clear bulrushes, tule reeds and thick sediment from the Guadalupe River in Alviso.

Construction is expected to begin in 2011 and finish the following year. When complete, the project will restore much of the lower Guadalupe River near where it empties into San Francisco Bay to conditions not seen since the early 1980s, with more access for boats and recreation.

In a larger sense, the issue had become a rallying cry for Alviso, the mostly Latino community of about 2,200 people on San Jose's northern edge. Many Alviso residents have said the water district's failure over the years to keep the river channel clear — as the district has done in other more high-profile areas, such as downtown San Jose — increased their risk of repeating a catastrophic flood, such as the 1983 winter deluge that put six feet of water into Alviso homes.

"You neglected the maintenance of the Guadalupe River," said Lurdes Rivera, a 45-year Alviso resident.

"You continued to ignore the Alviso community. You need to stop."

District engineers said removing the vegetation and silt will not improve flood protection.

Katherine Oven, an engineer and acting chief operating officer for the water district, noted Tuesday that Alviso already enjoys 100-year flood protection. That's because a 2004 project raised levees and adjusted a salt pond known as A8 so floodwaters can flow there instead of Alviso.

But Tuesday's project will improve recreation and maintain the current level of flood protection, she said.

Last year, Oven and other water district staff members recommended the largest of five options being considered for the river: a \$23 million project that would remove 25 acres of vegetation and dredge down 10 feet between the Gold Street Bridge and Alviso Marina County Park.

On Tuesday, however, she recommended that the board approve a smaller, scaled-back option: clearing vegetation from 3.7 acres, and dredging down to eight feet. The cost estimate is \$6 million — but that could rise up to \$12 million if the mud is found to have high levels of mercury, requiring disposal in distant hazardous waste landfills. The board approved the scaled-back project by a 7-0 vote, and most Alviso residents at the meeting called it a good start.

The Guadalupe River's woes date to the Gold Rush.

Founded in 1852, Alviso began as a busy port. Steamships carried redwood, quicksilver and orchard fruits to the bay and around the world. But during the 1860s, when railroads were built between San Jose and San Francisco, they bypassed

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Alviso and eventually the port silted in.

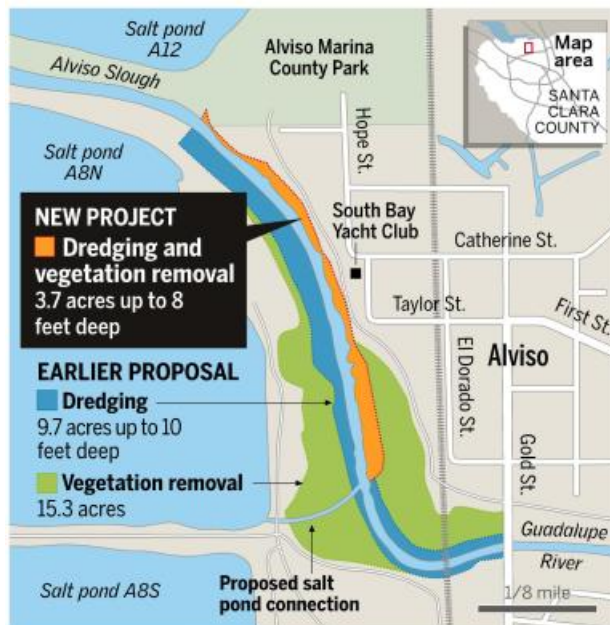
The construction of salt evaporation ponds in the 1930s rerouted the Guadalupe River, cutting off tidal action. Later, in the 1960s, as Alviso was being annexed into San Jose, the Army Corps of Engineers and the water district straightened the river to improve flood safety. But in removing its lazy meanders, they inadvertently created a freeway for sediment, which now collects at Alviso.

"It was beautiful. We had hunting and fishing," said Dick Santos, a water district board member and lifelong Alviso resident. "Sea lions came up there. We had herring and smelt."

As a result of the changes, the river became muddier, with less salt water from the bay. By 1980, an enormous growth of bulrush's and cattails began to take over. Meanwhile, abandoned derelict boats lined the banks.

Clearing the Guadalupe River

The Santa Clara Valley Water District on Tuesday approved a \$6 million project to remove sediment, thick bulrushes and tule reeds from the lower Guadalupe River to make it navigable for boats again. The project scales back an earlier proposal, which would have cost \$23 million.



Source: Santa Clara Valley Water District MERCURY NEWS

"We can't go boating now because we have to wait for high tide," Santos said. "The shrimp is now three miles out because of all the fresh water. It's unacceptable."

Water district studies bear out the changes. In 1977, one spot in the river was 218 feet wide. By 2004, it was 54 feet wide.

The district staff opted for a smaller project, Oven said, because of cost, and concerns from agencies

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like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service — which have yet to issue permits for the job — that too much work in the channel might harm wildlife and stir up old mercury sediments.

Several environmental groups spoke out against any project. Their objections have included concerns about mercury and loss of wetlands.

"This isn't a restoration project, it's a redevelopment project," said Shani Kleinhaus, of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society.

All sides said they hope a state and federal project scheduled to begin in December to build a 10-foot-wide "notch" channel through salt pond A8 to the river will bring salt water and tidal action back, potentially killing the thick vegetation and scouring the channel.

Meanwhile, work continues on a new boat ramp at Alviso Marina County Park, which will allow the public to put boats into San Francisco Bay at San Jose for the first time in nearly 30 years since an old county marina at Alviso silted up.

"If the public doesn't get to enjoy wildlife, they will ignore it," said Alviso resident Charles Taylor. "With these projects, people will have more access. This area will become a jewel."

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