

San Francisco Chronicle

SFGATE.COM | Friday, April 16, 2010 | PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

\$1.00 *****

OPEN FORUM *On California Water*

A watershed moment for S.F. creeks

By Bonnie Ora Sherk, Carole Schemmerling and Jennifer Clary

We are at a watershed moment in our progress toward making San Francisco a truly green city.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission plans to spend \$4 billion to upgrade the city's sewage system, including replacing the underground plumbing. We should embrace this moment to take the creeks out of pipes and restore them as healthy waterways wherever possible. We will then be able to use this fresh-water in more appropriate, cost-effective and ecological ways.

Believe it or not, San Francisco is blessed with multiple watersheds and underground creeks. The largest, Islais Creek Watershed, links at least 10 neighborhoods in southwest and southeast San Francisco: Crocker Amazon, Excelsior, Sunnyside, Glen Park, Noe Valley, Mission, Bernal Heights, Potrero Hill, Bayview and Portola.

In the 19th century, San Francisco creeks were filled in to make room for development. In those days, people thought they could control nature. In order to make more land available for buildings, creeks were buried and the fresh water directed into the sewer system.

Today, we know this thinking is wrongheaded. In many places in San Francisco, when there is a great storm (or even when there is no storm), buildings flood or mold sprouts because the building is situated atop, or adjacent to, a creek.

Millions of gallons of creek water mix each day with sewage, requiring expensive cleaning at wastewater treatment plants. The treated water is later piped out to the San Francisco Bay or the Pacific Ocean, and thus wasted.

Many cities with buried creeks have begun to "daylight" them. Berkeley and Santa Rosa, for example, have restored their creeks and use them for good purpose, such as irrigation of vegetation, habitat restoration, storm water-treatment, flood control, community revitalization and beauty.

Our creeks and watersheds, too, present multiple and exciting opportunities — ecological,



Katy Raddatz / The Chronicle 2008

Islais Creek flows in Glen Canyon in San Francisco.

educational, traffic calming and economic — for the future.

Where to start? The SFPUC is planning to replace pipes under Cesar Chavez Street this summer to stop flooding. The street is built over Precita Creek, which flows into Islais Creek near the Highway 101 interchange, northernmost frame of the Islais Creek Watershed.

We applaud SFPUC for including elements in the plan to capture storm water here — but also urge them to reimagine, reconnect, reuse and liberate this buried creek, thus demonstrating that a 21st century sewer-system upgrade can, and will, begin to restore San Francisco's creeks and watersheds.

We ought to use the watershed as our framework to link open spaces, parks, schools, streets and communities. We can become green stewards of the environment — as well as become trained in new green jobs skills — while improving our communities for humans as well as other species.

The moment is now, and we must seize it.

Bonnie Ora Sherk is the founder and director of Life Frames, Inc. & A Living Library. Carole Schemmerling of Berkeley is co-founder of Urban Creeks Council. Jennifer Clary is a policy analyst for Clean Water Action in San Francisco.