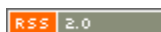


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Fish Fix Compromise May Benefit Old Town Goleta

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Steelhead trout, like the one pictured here in a Carpinteria creek, are genetically the same as rainbow trout. But while rainbows stay in fresh water, steelhead move out into the ocean, returning to fresh water only to spawn. (Matt Stoecker photo)

Thanks to a design that increases San Jose Creek's capacity while making it easier for fish to travel upward along its channel, Goleta will not only unlock the door to revitalization of its Old Town but make it possible for steelhead trout to make use of foothill spawning grounds.

“It's a win-win situation, really,” said Brian Trautwein, an analyst at the [Environmental Defense Center](#).

San Jose Creek is a tributary that once cut a winding path through Old Town Goleta, from the foothills north of the community into the Goleta Slough. With development, the creek was rerouted via a concrete channel that runs between South Kellogg Avenue and Highway 217.

The concrete channel that was meant to redirect flows away from the heart of Old Town failed to contain periodic floods, however. As a result, flows that breached the channel's banks would spread along Hollister Avenue, following the creek's ancient path and leaving damaged buildings and infrastructure in its wake.

It's the threat of these floods that has been keeping Old Town's complete revitalization just out of reach,

according to Steve Wagner, [Goleta's director of community services](#).

“Until you solve the flooding, you can't beautify the corridor,” he said. “Until you solve the flooding, none of the redevelopment projects can really go forward.”

While plans for San Jose Creek flood control date to when Goleta was overseen by Santa Barbara County, it wasn't until 2003 that the city began to hatch its own plan to increase the creek's capacity by installing vertical floodwalls and removing the channel's sloped sides.

Anxious to get Old Town revitalization under way, the City Council approved the plan, with the work expecting to commence about now.

For local environmental groups, the project served as an opportunity to right an environmental wrong. The more than 4,000-foot long concrete lining, they said, had for years kept steelhead from accessing spawning grounds.

“Steelhead are remarkable fish,” Trautwein said, “but even they can't overcome the increased velocity that flows at that channel.”

At high flows the current would be too strong, said Trautwein, and at lower flows the water would be too shallow for the fish, which can grow to over two feet long and more than seven inches tall.

Steelhead trout in the Southern California region are considered an endangered species, having been subject to pollution, habitat loss and other urbanization effects. In San Jose Creek's case, the several hundred feet of concrete channel created a velocity barrier: flows through the channel during spawning season were too strong for the steelhead to swim against.

“They can swim up to 21 feet per second in short bursts,” Trautwein said. “But they can't do that in a long channel.”

For a time, the city and the environmental groups pushed against each other, with Goleta focused on a flood control project and public safety, eco-groups calling for a fish passage project.

The matter was decided at the county level when the Board of Supervisors handed the project back to the city with an order to work in a fish passage project. While Goleta was the lead agency for this project, ultimately the facility would belong to the [county Food Control District](#).



Juvenile steelhead, probably on their way out to the ocean. (Matt Stoecker photo)

“Bottom line is, if we wanted the county as a funding partner, we would have to incorporate a fish passage project,” said Wagner.

The city assembled a working group comprised of local environmental groups, regulatory personnel from the [state Department of Fish & Game](#) and fish passage experts. Taking cues from Santa Barbara's Mission Creek Fish Passage Project, the group came up with an alternative that not only promised to contain contained higher volumes of water, but also made fish passage possible with a total cost of \$14 million, or even less.

“Balancing the designs between fish, maintenance concerns and coming up with something you can build was the challenge,” said Wagner.

What they came up with was a wider channel with a groove running along one side for the steelhead to swim through. At intervals there would be weirs — small dam structures — that would slow down water and provide a place for fish to rest as they fought the current upstream.

In the process, the group also figured out how to avoid replacing the Hollister bridge — a component of the original plan that was costly and time consuming, as well as a hassle for the public who regularly drive through that section of Old Town Goleta.

“After a year redesigning it and fine tuning it, we're almost at the same schedule and cost that we were a year before without fish passage,” Wagner said.

It's still an upstream swim for project proponents. State Coastal Commission approval is the biggest hurdle but Wagner is optimistic that the project, which is supported locally by [Channelkeeper](#) and the [National Audubon Society](#), will get a good reception. If things go smoothly, construction could begin this time next year. The plans also have to be approved by agencies like the state Department of Fish & Game, and the [Army Corps of Engineers](#).

“It's a good example of how projects that protect the environment are also good for the community,” said Trautwein. “We're excited.”

Until Santa Barbara's Mission Creek fish passage project is complete, San Jose Creek's project would be the longest modification of a concrete channel for fish passage ever done, Trautwein said.

As for the fish, well, it's not over. Where they once numbered in the thousands, there may be fewer than a hundred now. Around San Jose Creek other urban factors still count against them, like pollution, lack of flow due to pumping from the creek, and higher temperatures from the water warmed up in the channel. But, say the parties involved, the fish passage project is a step in the right direction, and with some luck, steelhead trout could be swimming up through Old Town Goleta.

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written by a guest , April 17, 2008

The steelhead aspect of this article and plan is terrific.

The claim that Old Town Goleta floods because of constrictions in San Jose Creak is bunk, however. All sorts of other flooding there is more frequent than San Jose backing up... the one time San Jose backed up in the last 10 or so years, it was because the culvert under Hollister plugged up, not due to capacity inadequacy in the concrete portion.

Much more frequent are floods on Thornwood and floods at Hollister and Fairview. This project does not help the true causes (like those) of floods in Old Town.