



SEARCH

[welcome](#) [contents](#) [classifieds](#) [archive](#) [events](#) [places](#)
[Subscribe to our feeds](#)

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CLASSIFIEDS
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Contents

Cover Story

News

[Citizen's Alert](#)
[Features](#)
[News Briefs](#)
[News Of The Week](#)
[Quote Of The Week](#)

Arts & Entertainment

A&E Blog

Arts Feature

Arts Life

[Indy List](#)

[Locals Only](#)

[News 2 Yous](#)

[Of The Week](#)

Books/poetry

Classical

[Classical Review](#)

[Music Lovers](#)

Dance

Film/movie Guide

[Film Preview](#)

[Film Review](#)

[Movie Guide](#)

Online Special Feature

Pop, Rock & Jazz

[Fringe Beat](#)

[Online Special Feature](#)

[Prj Preview](#)

[Prj Review](#)

[Sound & Fury](#)

[State Street](#)

Theater

[Theater Preview](#)

[Theater Review](#)

Weekly Calendar

[Thursday](#)

[Friday](#)

[Saturday](#)

[Sunday](#)

[Monday](#)

[Tuesday](#)

[Wednesday](#)

[Best Bets](#)

Living

Amgen Blog

By The Numbers

Close Up

Etc.

Feature

Food/wine

[What's Hot](#)

[Wine](#)

Gardening

news of the week

[home](#) » [news](#) » [news of the week](#)

Sweet and Sour News for Creek

By [Nick Welsh](#), August 17, 2006

by [Nick Welsh](#)

The good news about Mission Creek is that the California Coastal Commission (CCC) finally approved a flood-control and creek-restoration plan for the lower 1.3 miles of Santa Barbara's downtown channel. The bad news is that in the six years since the creek plan was last before the CCC, the Army Corps of Engineers—the federal agency whose approval and funding have been critical to the life of the project—has run out of money. But even if the funding were available, construction costs have risen so astronomically, it's highly doubtful that the Mission Creek project still meets Army Corps requirements that project costs must at least equal project benefits. In 2000, project costs were estimated at \$18 million, to be split evenly between the Army Corps of Engineers and local government. By 2003, the estimates had escalated to \$28 million, which pushed the cost-benefit arithmetic almost to the breaking point. "We barely made it back then," said Santa Barbara city engineer Pat Kelly. "I can't imagine how we'll qualify now." Putting a brave face on matters, Kelly said now that City Hall has the CCC's blessing, it can compete effectively for a host of flood-control and creek-restoration grants. In addition, he said the County Flood Control Agency has been quietly amassing a treasure chest of unspent flood-control assessments enacted in 1995.

Back in 2000, when the Army Corps was experiencing no shortage of funds, environmentalists and creek advocates represented by the Environmental Defense Center (EDC) opposed the Mission Creek project, arguing that it failed to safeguard the tidewater goby, an endangered fish living in the creek. In addition, they charged, the project plan lacked adequate provisions for the endangered steelhead trout, which for millennia has made winter runs up the creek to spawn. In response to those concerns, the CCC ordered the Army Corps and City Hall to modify the creek plans accordingly. EDC's Brian Trautwein expressed pride in the changes resulting from his organization's advocacy, but said that the new plans—and fish studies supporting them—should not have taken five years to complete. Contributing to the delay has been the fact that with the advent of the war in Iraq and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there's been a conspicuous dearth of Army Corps personnel available to work on the Mission Creek plan, let alone any who are up to speed on the project's long and tortured history.

By [Nick Welsh](#) | August 17, 2006 | [0 Comments](#) | [0 TrackBacks](#)

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Name

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Comments

- Happenings
- History 101
- Lifestyle
 - By The Numbers
 - Etc.
 - Lifestyle Feature
 - Pic Of The Week
 - Quiz
 - Trends
- Lifestyle Feature
- My Life
- Peeps
- Pic Of The Week
- Quiz
- Sports
 - Amgen Blog
- Today
- Trends
- What's Hot
- Wine

Opinions

- Angry Poodle Blog
- Editorial
- In Memoriam
- Letters
- On The Beat
- Santa Barbara Media Blog
- Voices

Special Sections

- After School Guide
- Barney's Fiesta Blog
- Best Of S.B. 2005
- Fiesta 2006
- Sb Film Fest '06
- Summer Camp
- Wants To Needs
- Wedding 2006

Places

- American
- Argentine
- Asian Pacific
- Bagel
- BBQ
- Bistro/cafe
- Cajun/creole
- California
- Chinese
- Coffee Houses
- Danish
- Deli
- Dining
- French
- Indian
- Irish
- Italian
- Japanese
- Juice Bar
- Mexican
- Middle Eastern
- Natural
- Organic
- Peruvian
- Sea Food
- Steak
- Thai
- Wine Shop/bars

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[Wine Tours](#)
[Wineries](#)



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[welcome](#) | [contents](#) | [classifieds](#) | [archive](#) | [events](#) | [places](#)
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