

Citizens express frustrations with ongoing Cosgrove Creek flooding issue; county seeks solution

By Lance Armstrong

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With the continued threat of flooding along Cosgrove Creek in Valley Springs, about 35 residents of that area attended a town hall meeting on this issue on Jan. 14. Several of the attendees voiced their frustrations and fears related to living in or near this river's flood zone. The meeting was presented by Calaveras County's Office of Emergency Services at the Jenny Lind Veterans Memorial Hall in Valley Springs for the purpose of keeping the community informed of the county's latest efforts to mitigate potential flooding in this area and seek a solution to this issue. This gathering additionally provided a formal public setting for residents of this area to discuss this topic. Ron Bassett, who lives about 100 feet above the creek, mentioned that he is far from new to this issue and community meetings that have been held in response to it "I just get frustrated with hearing (about this issue) over and over and over again and nothing ever happens," he said. "I've been here for almost 35 years, and it has been a problem since day one. And I've been to, I don't know, a dozen of these meetings, and it's the same thing: 'We're going to do this and that,' but nothing ever happens. So, hopefully, it will get better." Bassett noted that he also hopes that it does not take a fatality for this flooding issue to be resolved. "I understand (the procedures) with the government and all the federal and this and that and the creek," he said. "I understand all that. But to me, it's something (that) I guess somebody needs to get washed down the creek and die before something actually happens. "Nobody has died from it yet, but as soon as somebody does, they will go hurry up and get something done. That's usually the way it rolls." While efforts to decrease flooding along Cosgrove Creek have been made, this decades long problem remains one of the biggest issues for this area's residents who are demanding that more robust measures be made to address this problem. Further elevating the urgency to find a solution to this issue was the 2022-23 flooding along the creek. According to an article in the Jan. 11, 2023 edition of the Enterprise, nearly 50 Valley Springs homes were flooded less than two weeks earlier on New Year's Eve. A portion of that article reads: "The overflowing creek not only affected La Contenta homes, but surrounding trailer parks and apartments, as well. Several houses sit empty after being red-tagged (for being unsafe to occupy) by the county, while many have sandbags braced up against their walls. Some

homeowners were already doing renovations, such as replacing doors to repair the damage.” To reduce the risk of flooding along the creek and adjacent areas, last October, the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved a vegetation management project for the creek with Nate’s Tree Service, Inc., of Sonora. Initially budgeted at \$105,000, the project expanded to \$145,000, upon the board’s approval. Vegetation removal from Hogan Dam Road to the Calaveras River confluence was completed on Jan. 10.

Although the project aims to reduce creek flow obstruction, it is not intended to prevent flooding from major

storms. Conducting the Jan. 14 meeting was Erik Holt, director of the county’s Office of Emergency Services, who was joined by Calaveras County Supervisor Gary Tofanelli and Calaveras County Executive Officer Teresa Hitchcock. Holt mentioned that the county is very limited in

what it can do on its own to approach the creek’s flooding issue. “Currently, that’s all we’re allowed to do, is vegetation management,” he said. “We have to get a permit. The county does not own that property, so we have to get permission by the state and the federal government to go in and do any work. So, our permit that they have given us currently only allows us to do vegetation work. “We are not allowed to go in and dig soil. We’re not allowed to disturb habitat for protected species, any of that. So, we are under a restrictive permit, and then we’ve got to go to the board and get enough votes by the Board of Supervisors to do that, which, luckily, we did, and they were gracious enough to commit \$150,000.” Holt added that the county is currently seeking a \$1.2 million Federal Emergency Management (FEMA) grant for a hydrology study and a potential retention basin construction. “We won’t know whether we get approved on that amount until probably August, and then if we’re awarded the \$1.2 million, it has a three-year performance window,” he said. “So, we’ve got to complete the work and the study, and within that, develop the project.” While three years is allotted to complete the study, Holt stated that the county would seek to finish it within 12 to 18 months. Holt mentioned that in a conversation he had with a FEMA consultant last week, he was told that obtaining the grant and completing this type of project is usually about a 10-year process. “My hope is to get it down

to six to eight years, and maybe faster, if another funding source comes available,” he said. “I have the oversight and the ability to hold ourselves to a higher accountability standard than FEMA will hold us to, in speed,” he said. “When we have a period of performance, I can make sure that we are going as fast as we can through (it), and I intend to do that, for sure.” Holt stated that once the county has a shovel-ready project, it could seek a multimillion grant. The county, he added, would need to provide matching funds for the project. “Let’s say (if it is) a \$25

million project, we’ve got to come up with, as the county, 25% of that (amount) to match the federal government’s investment,” he said. Holt additionally spoke about the FEMA-

administered National Flood Insurance Program, a federal government-backed program that provides flood insurance to property owners, renters and businesses in participating communities. "We can attempt, as the county, to become a recognized community, and through our participation and work done, we can hope to reduce that cost to the homeowners," he said. "Within that program, there are options that homeowners can individually take. Sometimes FEMA will come in, they will buy the property out and tear the home down. That eliminates that residence from flooding. "There's a system where you can come in and ask FEMA to help you raise the foundation of the home, which can put you outside of the flood corridor. There (are) just options there. So, it's kind of a doable workforce, with private homeowners and the county engaging our state and federal partners to come up with a solution (for) the future." Holt stressed that the county's OES and other agencies would continue to approach any disaster to the best of its ability. "Disasters happen, and this is the reality of society living in nature," he said. "So, we can do our best, but a 1,000-year storm could come through, and there's nothing that can be done to stop that. "But at the OES level and our fire districts and law enforcement and all first-responder agencies, we can save lives during disaster, and when we go into the recovery phase, look at projects that help to solve it. But I think we've learned in the last few decades in the country that mega storms happen, and they are always possible. The best thing we can do is plan and adapt and respond to (them). "But no, there's nothing that we could do that will say, this will never happen again." Damon Wyckoff, director of operations for the Calaveras County Water District, acknowledged the community's frustration, and he recalled the flood of 2022- 23. "During the 2022-23 New Year's Eve storms going into 2023, our staff (was) out there just trying to do anything we can to support the emergency response effort to try to assist in any way possible," he said. "The folks who were getting flooded, our hearts just go out to them." He added that he believes that it is important to approach the issue of flooding from Cosgrove Creek with the intent of reaching a "place that's acceptable for everybody." "I think what's really kind of refreshing is the fact that we have a group in the OES team at the county that has really kind of taken to the Cosgrove (Creek) issue, and they're not shying away from it, and that's helpful for all of us," he said. "And I think whatever we can do to help them, we'll absolutely do it, because at the end of the day, our focus is trying to just be a good steward of the area." A portion of the Jan. 14 meeting was dedicated to a woman who had grown frustrated with a large tree stump along the creek that she wanted removed. Tofanelli guaranteed that the stump would be removed. "We are looking to get rid of that stump," he said. "It will be taken care of." Another meeting attendee who expressed frustration was Robert Banks. "I don't understand why things haven't been handled (better with the creek flooding issue)," he said.

“We’ve been here three years. You had the flood. They say I’m not in the flood plain. My house flooded. Now, I think it’s time they did something about this. “They keep telling everybody, ‘Hey, we’re going to take care of this, we’ve got another little program here.’ But I’m not willing to wait 10 years for this program to come about. I want to live. If it floods next year or later this year, I’m not going to be a happy man.” La Contenta resident George White criticized the lack of a unified governmental agency for the creek, and he stated that he favors having this waterway dredged. “I think that they need to dredge the creek and lower the bottom, because like (Holt) said, they were only able to weed eat down to the surface of the water,” he said. “So, if you go look in there, just outside my yard, there is just where they knock down all the cattails, but the roots of those cattails are still there in the creek, and so that displaces the water, and it has to come up out of the banks. “So, that’s why we have more flooding, because if it was deeper, (it could) stay within its banks. And we’ve had lots of old oak trees – 200-year old trees – get their roots all washed away. And then they just fall over, and then that blocks the creek, too.”

Another local resident, Helen Jacobs demanded that the creek should be cleaned out every year. “I want the creek cleaned out and kept cleaned out every year,” she said. While some local residents expressed their frustrations during the meeting, Holt recognized those comments, as well as their suggestions, as part of the process of community engagement and their efforts to seek improvements or a solution to this issue. “I thank the community for showing up (at the meeting), for being positive, for engaging in the conversation with us, and I hope to continue that work, engaging homeowners in the affected area and finding the solution,” he said.

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