

West Valley College up a creek, and happy about it

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Old potato chip bags and forgotten soda cans litter the area of Vasona Creek that cuts through the middle of West Valley College's campus. Rusted pipes protrude from the sides of the eroding creek, and pieces of concrete debris can be seen strewn throughout parts of the stream.

Much of it may go unnoticed by students and visitors, however, due to the overgrown shrubs of invasive plant species that have overrun most of the creek.

In an effort to bring Vasona Creek back in balance with its natural state, college administrators and faculty have decided to restore the riparian ecosystem. The plan calls for the removal of invasive species and restoration of indigenous plant species that would

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benefit the stream and local wildlife.

"I think this is good timing," said Rick Hawley, a groundskeeper and arborist with the college. "We've been destroying the planet for such a long time, and

now we're just starting to realize the mistake that we've made.

"To restore land is an important way of motivating people to come closer to nature and to see what we have." The cost of the project—from the planning stages to the actual restoration—is estimated between \$1 million and \$2 million, said West Valley College president Lori Gaskin. Trails would also be added that would connect with existing trail systems in the community.

The college is applying for the 2010 Environmental Enhancement Planning Grant released by the Santa Clara Valley Water District to help pay for part of the project. The grant would help absorb \$200,000 of the planning costs, Gaskin said.

Although restoring the creek has been a dream of faculty and staff for years, making that concept a reality didn't gain any traction until Gaskin was hired as the new president last year, said Chris Cruz, chairman of the college's park management department.

Cruz said he sees this as an opportunity to show students what they can do to help. Cruz said he expects having his classes assist in tearing out the invasive plants and eventually planting local species.

"By using the students to work [on the creek] and having community members come in and volunteer is something I can see being a really nice inter-mixing of the campus community and the community around the college," he said. "Frankly, that would be something that I think would benefit everybody."

Cruz and Hawley said the restored habitat along the creek would also help the local wildlife—everything

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from deer to bobcats to mountain lions and even monarch butterflies—by providing food for the animals and insects.

Ripping out the unwanted plant species would also save the lives of some of the campus oak trees, which are being choked to death by ivy or are falling down due to erosion around the creek.

Hawley said that the campus loses about one oak tree a year for those reasons.

"The accelerated erosion is undercutting our heritage oak trees, and that's something that we're really worried about," Gaskin said.

The erosion is being blamed on a variety of sources. Rain that once would have been absorbed by the land is now running off of campus building rooftops into the creek, Hawley said, adding that the concrete used decades ago to help grade the creek is actually causing more harm than good.

But if all goes as planned, West Valley College faculty and staff believe they may be able to turn back the clock and give the creek a future it rightly deserves.

Those who would like to donate to the Vasona Creek restoration project, or any other West Valley College project or program, can do so by giving to the West Valley-Mission Foundation. Contact Cindy Shelcher at 408.741.2165, or visit www.wvm.edu/foundation for more information.

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