

Dimond Canyon 17 Years Later – Dead or Alive?

Sausal Creek got a flushing in mid-February when about three inches of rain fell on our watershed. And shed it did, right down the creek. When the soil is so dry, rain doesn't soak in, it just runs off. But that's not entirely bad in this case, because the stream was at rock bottom.

That bone dry creek bed was what we saw on January 26 when the FOSC board of directors held its annual retreat—creekside in Dimond Canyon—to reflect on the mammoth restoration project that brought the organization into being. Seventeen years on, how did it look? What impact had we had?



As the dozen of us gathered near the El Centro trailhead, runners politely squeezed through the group, and dogs and walkers trotted by, some stopping briefly to listen in on the conversation. One impact was unmistakable: Dimond Canyon was being used and treasured, no longer the forbidding jungle of uncontrolled growth that had once kept everything out but rodents and feral cats.

But as we walked and talked, what we saw was beyond disquieting. The banks and slopes were run down and dusty with thousands of paw prints. The paths were splayed out with the imprints of feet and bicycle tires. The trout pools had silted up and were almost dry. Graffiti-tagged rocks, trees, and culverts rose out of the denuded streambed like the markings of a new voiceless generation. The creek looked tired and used up.

I wondered if Dimond Canyon—and maybe FOSC—had reached some kind of a turning point. Had we become a victim of our own success? Were we loving the canyon to death, and this historic drought had simply exposed our overuse? Every creek, canyon, and park has a capacity beyond which it will deteriorate. Have we reached the threshold in Dimond Canyon?

What we concluded that day was that low flows are to blame for some of the lack of green renewal, but social and political dynamics affect the creek just as greatly. We restored the canyon specifically so dog owners, runners, and hikers could use it and appreciate it. But when dogs run through the creek, disturbing the rainbow trout's habitat, or trample stream bank plants, increasing erosion and sedimentation into the creek, it defeats the effort.

How do we make it work for everyone? It requires taking a holistic perspective in managing and maintaining this public resource—figuring out how to benefit the most people while preserving the qualities of nature that make it precious. Like the springs that feed the trickles that fill the creeks that fill the oceans, we all play a part, finding our connections and contributing what we can.



As the Friends of Sausal Creek has grown over the years, we've found that our part involves tackling larger and more ambitious projects. We are about to take on the Mother of All Projects, having received a \$540,000 grant from the California Department of Water Resources Urban Streams Restoration Program to try to stop the erosion or hemorrhaging of soils in key areas of the creek and at the mouth where it enters the bay. Storm drains engineered long ago to flow without restraint on the Dimond Canyon slopes have created enormous gullies, driving tons of sediment into the creek.

It's the sort of project no one would take on in this no-man's land of wooded hillsides, a stone's throw from a dozen back yards but having no immediate affect on public safety or health. No one except FOSC. We have just inked the agreement with the city to start the repair of up to four storm drains using rock engineering to slow the flow of storm water. Board members Paul Frank and Bob Roat are civil engineers, and they will see that the dollars are used effectively. When completed, the project will be a remarkable achievement on many levels, not the least of which is blazing a new trail for FOSC in using state funds for a public purpose, reflecting our policy of civic engagement to enhance the health of the creek and watershed.

But it takes more than this. Everyone must do their part to keep the creek clean and healthy. The holistic approach must be based on education, appreciation of the unique resource we're lucky enough to have in our neighborhood, and recognition of our responsibility to minimize our impact on a destination that's becoming increasingly popular.

That's why you're a member of FOSC. You care about the health and appearance of our local treasure, and we treasure you as our supporters and volunteers who do the work that no agency has the wherewithal to do. We, the people, are the best land managers of our public spaces if we go about it with a sense of humility and appreciation for the gift we've been trusted to pass on to the next generation.

--Mark Rauzon, past president and founding member

