

## **URBAN CREEKS / ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUES**

### **Ideas spring for Rheem restoration**

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**By Dogen Hannah, staff writer**

RICHMOND - A group of West County residents, civic leaders and environmentalists with big plans for a small creek examined the neglected waterway Saturday.

As part of a multiyear effort to restore at least part of 3.4-mile Rheem Creek, about 60 people gathered at the Parchester Neighborhood Center to tour the creek by bus. They also brainstormed ways to revitalize the overlooked channel, which starts in Richmond and empties into San Pablo Bay.

"It's a small creek," said environmental planner Rich Walkling of the Natural Heritage Institute, introducing the gathering to the obscure object of their attention. "It's not as big or as flashy as its sister, San Pablo Creek."

Yet, Rheem Creek plays a vital, if sometimes destructive, role in the watershed that encompasses it and that is home to thousands of Richmond and San Pablo residents, Walkling said.

From its headwaters in a brush-choked gully in Rolling Hills Memorial Gardens cemetery a few hundred yards east of Interstate 80 until it reaches the bay a half-mile or so west of the Richmond Parkway, the creek helps to funnel and filter water and to sustain a shoreline marsh.

"Many of us for the first time are learning about the importance of Rheem Creek," Henry Clark of the West County Toxics Coalition, told tour participants after they disembarked the bus at the creek's headwaters.

Downstream, the tour stopped again where the creek passes through a residential neighborhood. Constricted and straightened during half a century of development and choked by non-native vegetation, the creek sometimes spills its banks when swollen by winter rain.

"So, my house suddenly is in the middle of a lake," Rollingwood neighborhood resident Marty Gomez told the group. "In the last two years, we've really been in trouble."

A \$440,000 government grant is paying the Natural Heritage Institute and four environmental and community organizations to learn more about the Rheem Creek watershed and to identify problems, such as flooding, and solutions.

In an unusual approach, the five organizations also intend to involve the community in finding ways to return the creek to a more natural state that will benefit the environment as well as people, Walkling said.

Creek restoration efforts often rely only on scientists and don't include residents and others in the community with a stake in the outcome, he said.

"It should be beautified," Parchester neighborhood resident Zeller Hurd, 65, told planners during the brainstorming session. "I would like to see the community involved in restoring the creek to the way it was, so we can all enjoy it."

Saturday's tour and brainstorm was the first of three planned gatherings to bring the community into the planning process. Although that effort is just getting under way, a plan to restore part of Rheem Creek is further along.

The Natural Heritage Institute has developed three restoration proposals for about the last half-mile of the creek, as it passes through former industrial land. If all goes as expected, that work could begin in spring 2007.#

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