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Bowker Creek study receives \$50,000 boost from province

BY KIMWESTAD *Times Colonist staff*

A study of Bowker Creek got a much-needed financial shot in the arm yesterday with \$50,000 from the province that will allow it to move into its second phase.

"This is really significant," said Jody Watson, chairwoman of the CRD's Bowker Creek Initiative.

"We are extremely reliant on external funding and this is about 50 per cent of the funding we need."

Bowker Creek starts at the University of Victoria, winds through Saanich, Oak Bay and Victoria, then runs almost parallel to Shelbourne Street until it reaches Royal Jubilee Hospital. There, it heads east past Oak Bay High School and empties into Oak Bay near Glenlyon Norfolk school. You can be forgiven for not knowing that, though, because only about 2.5 kilometres of the eight-kilometre creek is above ground now.

Fifty years ago, Bowker Creek was a popular fishing spot for locals, home to coho salmon and trout.

But as the region grew and more homes and roads and shopping malls were built, much of the once-vibrant creek was diverted into culverts buried under asphalt. The water became polluted, the once-abundant fish died and the portion of the creek left above ground began to flood every year, overburdened by the stormwater rushing into it.

There are many lessons to be learned from the creek, lessons that can be taken into the future, says Watson.

The first part of the study has been done. It's a master drainage plan that looks at all the rainfall in the 1,028-hectare watershed, the pipes and infrastructure system in place for conveying that water.

The second phase will add the environmental, social and economic components to that study. It will look at things such as habitat and where it can be improved, water quality and what sort of amenities communities want, such as paths or greenways.

The studies will be the first in the province to also look ahead at climate change and take that into account, Watson said. Climate change is expected to create wetter winters. That means more water coming into the creek. When complete, the studies will have a list of recommendations and guidelines that municipalities can use in planning.

For example, bylaws might require ground surfaces that soak up water or buildings that have storm water detention ponds.

Because so much land is built up and is therefore impervious, rainfall isn't able to sink into the ground.

In nature, only 15 per cent or less of rainfall goes into a creek via surface water, because the water is slowed by trees and vegetation. But in urban environments up to 80 per cent of rainfall gets to the creek in less than two hours.

"In a natural environment, it might take days for water to get to the creek. We changed that, and it's now within hours," Watson said.

Community volunteers have been crucial to the project, Watson said. They've done everything from cleaning up the creek, to fundraising, to holding tea parties.

It's difficult for people now to look at the creek and see it as a vital waterway.

So, volunteers are videotaping the recollections of those people who remember it as it once was.

"If we can get back that vision of what the creek was, we can then see what it could be in the future," Watson said.

Darren Stone/Times Colonist



Jody Watson at Bowker Creek near St. Patrick's School: Second phase will look at habitat and water quality.

