

# Creek rising

Tanis Douglas says if the political will is there,  
Bowker Creek can be restored to its former glory

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*Don Denton/News staff*

# Bringing back Bowker

Creek advocates seek funding to help mitigate damage to the local waterway

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Once full of life and pristine, the now polluted and overdeveloped Bowker Creek is a small step closer to being revitalized.

The three municipalities that the creek winds through, as well as the Capital Regional District, will each get up to \$10,000 from the Ministry of Community Services to pay for the development of a plan to protect and manage the creek. That potential \$40,000 is contingent on each municipality and the CRD contributing \$5,000. Both Saanich and the CRD already plan to do so.

That's good news for the co-ordinator of the Bowker Creek Initiative (BCI), but Tanis Douglas is still wondering where the money will come from once the plan is put in motion.

"The real question is, once we've got these recommendations, who's going to pay to implement them?" she asked. "Capital projects always cost a lot of money."

Douglas is the sole employee of the BCI - a partnership of Oak Bay, Victoria, Saanich, the CRD and several other groups, such as the Friends of Bowker Creek Society.

The plan to be developed by the BCI is called the Integrated Stormwater Management Plan and will likely get underway this fall. The hope is to have it completed by 2009, said Douglas.

In June, Douglas and Bowker Creek Initiative chair Jody Watson made a presentation to Oak Bay council.

"How are we going to cost-share?" Watson asked councillors. Implementing the recommendations for the creek will cost "a lot of dollars," she said.

"Municipalities need to start discussing this," urged Watson, who is also the Harbours and Watersheds Co-ordinator at the CRD.

Oak Bay Mayor Christopher Causton told Douglas and Watson that the requests for funding will be "competing head on" with money needed for hospitals, transportation planning, sewage and so forth.

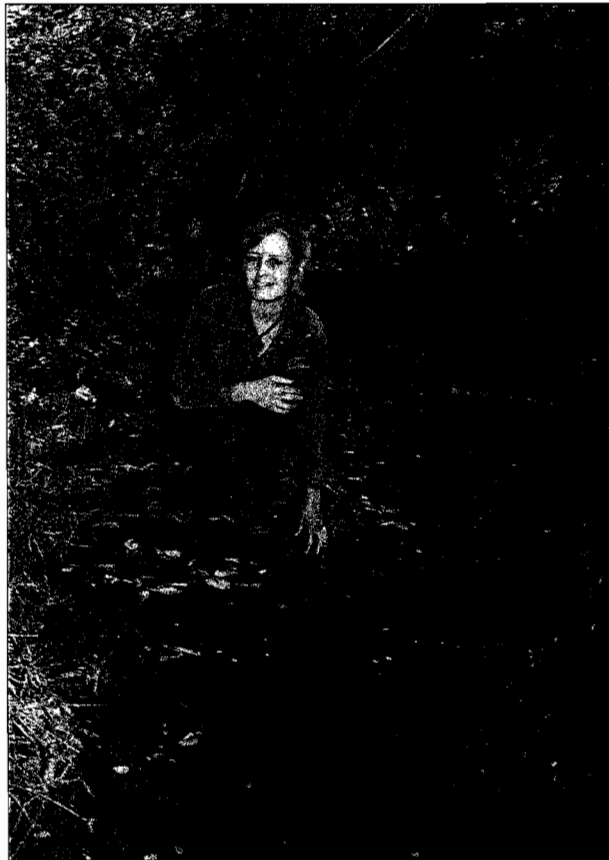
"There are so many financial demands right now in municipalities," Causton said.

Oak Bay councillors Frank Carson and Allan Cassidy said they were hesitant to fund Bowker Creek projects in Victoria and Saanich, especially since Oak Bay is downstream and has the most problems with flooding and erosion.

"Why would we be compelled to be digging up roads and ditches in Saanich and Victoria?" asked Coun. Carson, adding decisions made in those municipalities in the past did not look at the downstream impact.

"We need to identify the victim and the villain," said Cassidy.

When council decided to apply to the Ministry of Community Services for the grant in March, they decided Oak Bay would not contrib-



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Tanis Douglas, the Bowker Creek Initiative's co-ordinator for the CRD, poses beside Bowker Creek just off Monteith Street.

## Bowker backgrounder

- Bowker Creek is eight kilometres long, beginning at the University of Victoria and winding through Saanich, Victoria and Oak Bay. Most of the creek runs underground through culverts created in past decades.
- The Bowker Creek watershed is 1,028 hectares, or 2,540 acres. The watershed is the area that drains surface water and groundwater to the creek. The land in the Bowker Creek watershed is used for many different purposes, including roads and commercial areas, recreation, fish and wildlife habitat, as well as human habitation.
- Layers of shells, ashes and other camp debris have been found at a site adjacent to the creek. Called a "middens", the area was populated by local First Nations and is at least 2,600 years old.
- Before the land around Bowker Creek was developed, the waterway supported populations of coho salmon and cutthroat trout.

ute \$5,000 in order to maximize the contribution from the ministry. If Oak Bay does not contribute \$5,000, the grant from the ministry will be \$5,000, not \$10,000.

After the July 16 council meeting, Coun. Nils Jensen said he wanted to revisit the issue with council and consider putting \$5,000 toward the Integrated Stormwater Management Plan.

"We all have a common interest in solving the issues, I think, because we've all had a common role in creating the problems," said Jensen. "We have to find some equitable way of distributing cost. We have to take into account that this is a wider community issue."

"It's really important that everyone contributes," said Ian Graeme, the founder and president of the Friends of Bowker Creek Society. "It's about partnerships and the community working together."

## Renewing the watershed

Since 2004, the Bowker Creek Initiative has been assessing its namesake waterway.

Most recently, the group conducting the study has looked at the flow of water in the creek, which drains rain and groundwater from a 2,540-acre swath of land in the Capital Region.

Part of BCI's work has been find-

## Is climate change affecting Bowker Creek?

As the Bowker Creek Initiative considers the future of the creek, it is also taking into account possible climate change.

"We're preparing for more rain," said program co-ordinator Tanis Douglas. "The consensus is that there's a strong possibility of increased precipitation."

After two overwhelming rainstorms in the region this past year (and some other unusual weather), Douglas said: "We're wondering how much is due to climate change and how much is just random."

Until climate information is graphed over a longer period of time, we won't know for sure, she said.

ing ways to prevent floods along Bowker Creek, like after the heavy rainfalls in November and January when Fireman's Park was submerged, water leaked into neighbouring residences, and some banks along the creek were washed out.

Flooding like that is worsened by all the impervious surfaces in the Bowker watershed, said Douglas. At the Hillside Mall parking lot, for example, rainwater streams across the paved surface when it rains. It carries along pollutants (such as oil from cars) and then falls into storm drains that flow directly into Bowker Creek.

"Imagine the area before it was paved," said Douglas, when rain would have just been absorbed into the ground.

Some of the water would have been taken up by plants and some of it would have eventually evaporated, Douglas said. The remainder would have filtered through the earth and slowly seeped into the creek to be drained into the ocean.

Managing the increased water flow in the creek has been a priority for the BCI, but the latest project will also integrate information about environmental and social aspects of the creek. The resulting plan - the Integrated Stormwater Management Plan - will include recommendations for enhancing and protecting Bowker Creek's ecology and for improving the relationship between the creek and the people that live nearby.

"It basically recognizes a societal shift in how we view water and watersheds," said Douglas, a registered professional biologist.

"Before, people approached the creek as something to cover up to make room for more development," Douglas said. In the 1920s, she added, culverts started to be dug for Bowker Creek to flow under buildings and roadways.

More than 60 per cent of Bowker Creek now runs through those culverts, and some aren't big enough to accommodate the rush of water that comes after heavy rains.