

## Our view: Chester Creek

### Restoration project enhances one of the loveliest places in town

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Federal salmon restoration money has brought Anchorage a gem of a creek improvement at Westchester Lagoon. The \$12 million project restores a much more natural outfall for Chester Creek, which had been hemmed in by the Alaska Railroad embankment. Before, the embankment acted like a dam, and the creek drained underneath it through the hydraulic equivalent of a trapdoor. Now, the creek flows freely out of the lagoon, gurgling pleasantly through a large 'S' curve lined with rock, new vegetation and a viewing platform, then rushes through a big new, reinforced opening under the railroad tracks. Freeing up the creek required building a handsome wooden bridge for the Coastal Trail, which crosses the outfall.

More than half the \$12 million was used on the Inlet side of the tracks, relocating a major fuel line and sewer line. Those utility lines had to be dropped lower in the ground so the creek could flow safely overtop them.

The restoration has two purposes: to lure salmon back to the watershed and to reduce flood hazards by creating safe areas where excess water can go.

The project has turned part of the land alongside the lagoon back to the marshy estuary it used to be. When heavy rains send water cascading downstream, the area can handle the overflow, so it doesn't back up into low-lying homes and streets. Super-high tides will send water from the inlet up under the tracks, back into the viewing area.

Opening up the creek should be great for the creek's now-sparse runs of salmon. No longer will they have to navigate an underground tunnel and squeeze through metal grates on the drainage weir.

It's too early to tell how many more salmon will start returning to the creek. Once you go upstream past the lagoon, it's not exactly prime salmon habitat, says municipal park planner Brad Dunker. Parts have been channeled or straightened. Heavy foot traffic has worn down stream banks in spots. There aren't a lot of quiet spots for salmon to rest or spawn, until you get all the way across town beyond Muldoon Road.

But this enhancement project has already paid off for any people coming to the area. You can wander off the Coastal Trail onto the viewing platform and listen to the peaceful rush of the newly liberated waters. You can check out the educational displays, watch for live fish and look at the metallic salmon decorating the watery outlet under the railroad tracks. Turn around to the east, and you enjoy an expansive view of the city's velvet backdrop, the Chugach Mountains.

One of the greatest places in Anchorage is now even better.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Nice job on this \$12 million makeover.

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