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A NEW ERA IN SAN JOSE

DOWNTOWN FLOOD CONTROL PROJECT SEES COMPLETION

By Paul Rogers
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Opening a new era for San Jose that promises fewer floods, more wildlife and a string of new riverfront parks, local and federal officials on Friday celebrated the completion of a landmark flood-control project on the Guadalupe River through the heart of the city's downtown.

The largest such project in San Jose's history, the \$346 million effort marks the end of more than 30 years of debate, legal challenges, planning studies and construction.

The project stretches more than nine miles from Interstate 280 near the Children's Discovery Museum past Mineta San Jose International Airport to Alviso. It doubles the amount of water the South Bay's largest river can hold during the heavy winter rains that have vexed San Jose's core neighborhoods for 150 years, most recently with the 1995 storms that put downtown streets under 15 feet of water.

``There's probably one word on the mind of everybody here today -- finally," joked U.S. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta at a riverfront ceremony near HP Pavilion.

``These waters can be managed now for what they are -- an asset and not a threat," said Mineta, a former mayor of San Jose. ``This is one of the most important flood-control projects that America has ever seen -- today signed, sealed and delivered. It is a very historic occasion."

The project was built primarily by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, along with the Santa Clara Valley Water District. The two agencies roughly split the cost. The San Jose Redevelopment Agency has put up most of an additional \$99 million to buy land along the river and convert it to a network of parks for walking, picnicking and bicycling.

``Think Central Park in New York or Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. This is San Jose's Central Park," said former San Jose Mayor Tom McEnery.

Construction of the riverfront parks, known collectively as the Guadalupe River Park & Gardens, is still under way between Santa Clara Street and Julian Street. A grand opening is planned for Sept. 10. On that date, people will be able to bicycle or walk the entire nine miles from downtown San Jose to Alviso.

Though it had sparked legal threats in the mid-1990s, the project won accolades from business leaders, politicians and environmentalists.

All said Friday that it protects offices, homes and high-tech companies with traditional concrete reinforcements such as stronger levees, while at the same time including innovative ``green" features, notably gravels and pools for spawning salmon, bicycle trails, and groves of cottonwood, sycamore and willow trees lining the banks.

``I'm thrilled," said attorney Richard Roos-Collins of the Natural Heritage Institute, a Berkeley law firm. ``The project is extraordinary in many ways. It is very green for a flood-control project in a downtown area."

In 1996, Roos-Collins, representing four environmental groups, filed a notice to sue, claiming the plan called for too much concrete, and would result in hundreds of trees being felled. That loss of shade would heat the water, opponents argued, threatening chinook salmon and steelhead trout that thrive in cool water and are just starting to make a comeback in the river.

After the showdown, the Army Corps, Santa Clara Valley Water District and city officials reworked the plans. They added two huge underground tunnels, which meant the project could move vast volumes of water during storms without dramatically altering the natural riverbanks.

One tunnel under downtown is a third of a mile long. The second is a half-mile long. The first opens at Santa Clara Street; the second at St. John Street. Both empty downstream near Coleman Avenue.

``Each one is basically the size of a 5-lane freeway," said David Chesterman, Guadalupe watershed manager for the water district.

The first Army Corps studies on the river began in 1941. But because of wars and other delays, the project lost momentum. Studies restarted in 1972, and Congress finally authorized funding in 1986.

``The original project was a concrete box -- kind of like the L.A. River," said Mark Charlton, deputy district manager of the Army Corps. ``We figured out that was a bad way to do a project. Now this is becoming the standard, where we balance flood control, wildlife and

recreation."

On Friday, as singers from the Theater on San Pedro Square belted out ``Singin' in the Rain" at the river ceremony, officials described the river renaissance as a major face lift for San Jose's downtown.

By the 1960s, the river was full of garbage and shopping carts. It was lined with vacant lots, railroad tracks and a mix of industrial buildings. Its new incarnation is being described as something of a civic living room that also will keep floodwaters off such key properties as HP Pavilion (in 1995, the site of the only National Hockey League game ever canceled due to flooding), Adobe Systems headquarters and the Tech Museum of Innovation.

``Buildings used to back up to the river," Charlton said. ``Now people are building them facing the river. The river is considered a valuable asset now."

The Guadalupe River begins in the Santa Cruz Mountains near Summit Road and flows to the bay at Alviso. It was named by Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza in 1776.

San Jose was on its way to becoming California's state capitol, but the river wrecked those hopes in 1849 when its floods disrupted the first California Legislature meetings here, and state leaders chose Sacramento instead. The river has flooded 12 times since World War II.

With the new work, the Guadalupe now has protection against a 100-year flood, a flood so large it has a 1-in-100 chance of occurring any year. Before, the Guadalupe only had 20-year flood protection. By the end of the year, downtown property owners could see their flood insurance rates fall by up to 40 percent.

``This is very satisfying," said Stan Williams, water district CEO. ``We've had hundreds of people working on this thing for many years. It is the project of a career."

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