

San Jose homeless remove 24 tons of trash from Coyote Creek

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SAN JOSE -- Amanda Fukamoto's campsite along Coyote Creek is the cleanest around. But the creek she calls home is a trash magnet. It's cluttered with years of castoffs from homeless residents and illegal dumpers.

So 56-year-old Fukamoto proudly pointed out the bulging black trash bags heaped uphill from the creek and ready for pickup by county employees. While Fukamoto acknowledges that the homeless community contributes to creek pollution, she also believes they can help solve it. The black bags are her proof. Since October, under Fukamoto's guidance, the Coyote Creek Homeless Stream Stewards have removed more than 48,000 pounds of garbage from their living area.

"Our goal is to have trash-free creeks," she said. "We're doing big things."

Those "big things" go beyond trash removal, because Fukamoto is keenly aware that a key solution to creek trash is tied to getting people off Coyote Creek's banks. And so, since May, she and other advocates for the homeless have met with officials from the Santa Clara County Water District to discuss longer-term solutions. Fukamoto hopes to strike a deal in which the homeless help keep Coyote Creek clean in exchange for permission to live in so-called "tiny houses" on a patch of non-creek water district property. The district would work with city partners to create a village of small, wheeled homes, generally under 350 square feet each, that a growing number of cities across the country are examining for its potential to combat homelessness; it would also provide the homeless with supplies for creek cleanup and revegetation.

It's an ambitious idea, Fukamoto admits, filled with regulatory and bureaucratic difficulties. While the tiny house plan is pending, the Homeless Stream Stewards are taking their own action.

With the support of Richard McMurtry, a retired programs director for the Santa Clara County Creeks Coalition, Fukamoto has rallied the creek community to pick up after both themselves and neighbors with a "trash raffle." For every two bags of trash they collect, participants receive a ticket and a chance to win \$10 gift cards. Fukamoto collects the bags at five checkpoints along roughly a half-mile of creek and, when a pile accumulates, uses her cellphone to email water district employees who take the waste away.

Participation varies week to week, peaking at around 20 people. With two bicycles in the mix of raffle prizes for September, enthusiasm is running high. In late July, Fukamoto said, the Stream Stewards had a record week with 182 trash bags from 17 volunteers.

"I have people coming to me saying, 'Do you have bags? I need bags!'" Fukamoto said happily. "They're excited. Everybody's hustling right now."

McMurtry, who funds the Stream Stewards with about \$5,000 collected in private donations, hired Fukamoto to form the Stream Stewards last fall after meeting her earlier in the year, when he asked her to join him on a creek cleanup and took her out to lunch.

Fukamoto's friends said she's the right person to coordinate the trash effort: She can start up a conversation with anyone, they say, as she makes her creek rounds handing out trash bags and enlisting volunteers.

"It's not just about the raffle," said Alvin "Cowboy" Crane, who lives a tent down from Fukamoto and contributed 15 bags last week. "I wanted to help out my neighbor."

Gary Giguere said the trash effort connects a community that's often scattered and shifting. Giguere is no longer homeless, but he's a proud member of the Stream Stewards and bikes to Coyote Creek regularly. In the process of picking up, he runs into people he hasn't seen in years.

"It's like a reunion sometimes," he said.

Previous initiatives aimed at involving San Jose homeless in creek cleanups died off. McMurtry says its partly because city officials have been hesitant to work with the homeless. After the Santa Clara County Creeks Coalition gave trash cans to San Jose homeless in fall of 2014, the city confiscated them, arguing that they would encourage homelessness along waterways rather than address root problems.

The water district, in contrast, has been more willing to support provisional cleanup tactics like the Stream Stewards' efforts even as the agency starts to seek longer-term, more housing-based solutions to homelessness.

According to Richard Santos, a board member of the water district, the agency spends about \$1 million each year on "damage control" removing garbage. And McMurtry said that the homeless, along with other litterers, generate trash almost as fast as volunteers can pick it up. By the Santa Clara County Creeks Coalition's visual estimates, between August 2014 and September 2015, the homeless generated 70,000 pounds of trash along a two-mile stretch of Coyote Creek -- largely negating the 82,000 pounds that the Creeks Coalition removed during that same period. Officials' "sweeps" to clear out homeless encampments have little long-term effect, McMurtry said.

Recognizing that sweeps were not working, Santos started the Homeless Encampment Ad Hoc Committee this spring to consider a range of programs that could combat litter and homelessness together, including the Stream Stewards' tiny house proposal, which McMurtry presented at the committee's latest monthly meeting on July 27. The committee is mulling a range of potential locations; the Stream Stewards suggested a gravel lot on Charcot Avenue.

Santos, one of three board members on the committee, said that he thinks McMurtry's proposal is a good one but that the committee cannot be hasty before presenting its ideas to the larger board. The tiny house encampment is rife with liability issues and questions about how to make various proposed spots fully livable with services from water access to school buses.

"What people want is some magic wand to put 90 or 100 houses on (the water district's) land," Santos said. "First you have to find out, from the city and the county: Can we allow that? It would be terrible of us to move people onto our property and then six months later evict them."

Regardless of how the tiny house plan turns out, Fukamoto hopes the Homeless Stream Stewards will demonstrate why the homeless should be included, rather than fought against, in the clean creek effort.

"They think we're stupid," Fukamoto said, referring to the community at large. "They think that we're worthless. But if they would just educate the people out here, they'd be more than willing to clean up. They just don't have the know-how."