

Talk of the Town: Cleaning up Granite Creek pollution

By MICHAEL BYRD, Special to the Courier

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Here in semiarid central Arizona, we are graced by the relative abundance of surface water. Depending on how you count them, the Prescott area has nine named creeks and four reservoirs within the Upper Granite Creek Watershed. These often clear-looking surface waters are a local destination for many. Looks, though, can be deceiving. That seemingly crystal-clear water is polluted. Working together is the only way we can change this.

Beginning in 2004, the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) and the US Environmental Protection Agency began listing our waterways as “impaired.” The often-clear water hides in plain sight high concentrations of nitrogen, E. coli bacteria and other contaminants that make the water sometimes unsafe for human contact – one of its designated uses. This “out of sight, out of mind” scenario has made it difficult for some people to understand and accept that this is a real problem. In fact, understanding and acceptance at a very basic level has taken more than a decade, with minimal effort made to remedy the situation.

The impairments are caused by what is known as “nonpoint source pollution,” and it’s tricky to deal with because there is no single discharge site, no single piece of contaminated property. Each time it rains, pollutants find their way to our creeks and downstream to our lakes. The E. coli likely comes from pet waste, out-of-date septic and sewer systems, urban agriculture and other nonpoint sources. Phosphorus and nitrogen leach from our lawns and gardens, run off our parking lots and streets, and come from other human-caused sources.

In a functional watershed, runoff carrying these contaminants would be either absent, or absorbed and filtered out through intact buffers of native vegetation. Meandering creeks would slow flows and deposit pollutant-laden sediments along the way in wetlands and floodplains. Today, with much of our developed landscape occupied by concrete, asphalt and rooftops, runoff flows unimpeded to our waterways. The waterways themselves have been straightened, further speeding up the flow, carrying more contaminants further downstream to Watson Lake.

To clean up our waterways and to benefit from the pollution-reducing services a functional watershed could deliver, our community needs to both address the pollutant sources and restore ecological functions lost in the urbanized setting. While it seems a daunting task, the solution, in part, is to simply allow our watersheds to function as they once did, and are intended to do.

By creating native vegetation buffers between development and waterways, by slowing and holding runoff flows with creative landscape design and development, by restoring our watershed lands and our creeks, we can reduce pollutant flows into our waterways. It can be as simple as catching rain from your roofs and planting native vegetation around buildings and yards. It can be as expansive and hopeful as creating scenic and community-friendly pathways bordered by strips of native vegetation buffering their users from traffic and filtering runoff flows from the surrounding streets.

Solving the pollution concerns in our local waterways takes a community effort. Now is the time to begin working together. Multiple approaches will be of greatest benefit:

Building on past efforts of Prescott Creeks Preservation Association and ADEQ, local community stakeholders (including governmental entities, nongovernmental organizations, educational institutions, the business community, private landowners and others) should formalize a permanent collaborative body to strategize solutions and prioritize watershed improvement projects to achieve pollution reduction targets as mandated by the state and federal governments. Solutions and projects could range from evaluation, and where appropriate, revision of codes and policy, to on-the-ground improvements. This body would demonstrate needed leadership and cooperation to the overall community and pull together diverse perspectives, expertise and resources, along with avoiding costly, inefficient duplication of efforts.

We should encourage private property owners throughout the watershed to make improvements on their yards and gardens, homes, businesses, and vacant properties. While governments and public properties may hold promise for improvement projects on a larger scale, they alone will not solve our problems. Many smaller efforts throughout the watershed will be essential to improving water quality.

The greater Prescott area often promotes itself based on its natural beauty, opportunities for recreation and small town values. Protection and improvement of our surface waters is an essential investment in the qualities that make this area so appealing to all.

Michael Byrd and Guy Whol of Prescott Creeks will discuss our watershed issues when they speak to the Citizens Water Advocacy Group on March 12. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

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