Richmond Watershed

Lobos Creek

Lobos Creek is the last intact stream on the San Francisco Peninsula. Runoff, natural springs, and underground seepage from Mountain Lake feed the creek as it travels along the edge of the Presidio to the ocean. Lobos Creek Valley provides important native and wildlife habitat including the largest stand of willows remaining on the Peninsula. Lobos Creek also provides much of the potable water for the Presidio.

Mountain Lake was the site of the original Presidio settlement. Current efforts to improve water quality and native habitat around the lake are being undertaken by the National Park Service and others.

Natural History

The Dunescape, late 1800’s

The Richmond watershed was originally covered in well-drained sand dunes with patches of bedrock at Land’s End and northeast of Mountain Lake.

The dunes were interwoven with small perennial and intermittent lakes and ponds. Most of these lakes were not formed conventionally by streams. Instead of forming rivulets, rainwater percolated through the porous dunes downward to the groundwater table. Most lakes and ponds formed in depressions where the dunes and shallow groundwater intersected.

Golden Gate Park was originally covered with shifting sand and small marshy lakes. Of the original 14 lakes mapped in 1872, only three of the lakes, Elk Glen, Middle and North Lakes, were originally natural groundwater fed and later deepened. The remaining lakes are man-made.

Serpentine Grasslands of the Presidio, 1908

Parks and open space cover a significant portion of the Richmond watershed, in large part because of the Presidio, which is split between the Richmond and North Shore watersheds.

The Presidio manages 991 acres of open space, more than 260 acres are natural areas. Existing Presidio natural areas support remnant plant communities that provide habitat for twelve rare, threatened or endangered species. These include several species that have evolved special adaptations to live in San Francisco’s dune or serpentine soils. Threatened plant species in the park include Raven’s manzanita, Presidio clarkia, Marin dwarf flax, San Francisco lessingia and others. The Presidio also supports a wide range of wildlife, including over 200 bird species.

Current Projects

The SFMTA has proposed a Bus Rapid Transit Line for Geary Boulevard to improve transit time and reliability in the heavily transited corridor. The project is in environmental review and expects to initiate preliminary engineering and final design this year.

The Public Health Service District reopened in 2010 as a green neighborhood in the Presidio, with homes, office space, a pre-school, and 25 acres of open space and native habitat.

The SFPUC is planning the Baker Beach Green Street project to help reduce stormwater runoff entering the combined sewer system with rain gardens and permeable paving.

Neighborhood History

The Outside Lands, 1901

In the 1860s, the Richmond watershed was part of the “Outside Lands”. Most San Franciscans considered the western side of the city to be uninhabitable because of its rolling dunes and frequent fog and wind.

Laurel Hill Cemetery, 1936

Although the “Outside Lands” were not originally a desirable place to live, they were a desirable place to bury the dead. By the 1850s the Richmond Basin was host to five major cemeteries. In addition to resting places for the dead, the cemeteries also served as open spaces where San Franciscans went for relaxation. By the 1950s all the cemeteries had been moved or destroyed to make room for development.

Geary and 18th Ave, 1929

Neighborhoods in the Richmond watershed developed earlier than the rest of the “Outside Lands”, in part because of transit lines which carried people across the Richmond Basin to beach attractions such as the Cliff House and Sutro Baths. Adolph Sutro’s 1881 rail car service is credited with providing the transit needed to bring residents to the Richmond district.

Brown Pelican

Housing in the Presidio

The original Presidio settlement was established in 1776. From 1776 to 1994, the Presidio was used as a military post, hosting operations for the Spanish, Mexican, and United States governments. It also served to house soldiers and later officers’ families. Today the Presidio is a National Park. Old barracks and officers’ homes have been converted to housing for students and the general population.