

Friends of Sausal Creek



Photo courtesy of Friends of Sausal Creek




The **Friends of Sausal Creek** is dedicated to promoting awareness, appreciation, and stewardship of Oakland's Sausal Creek Watershed, which drains to San Francisco Bay.

The Friends of Sausal Creek (FOSC) is a volunteer-based, nonprofit, community organization dedicated to promoting awareness, appreciation, and stewardship of Oakland's Sausal Creek Watershed, which drains to San Francisco Bay. Our mission is to restore, maintain, and protect the watershed. We engage students and youth, promote community stewardship, and collaborate with partners on behalf of the local ecosystem.




Community Location

 Community Partner Region

0 0.25 0.5 Miles
0 0.25 0.5 Kilometers

Source: TomTom North America (2019)
Metropolitan Transportation Commission (2022)
Map Author: MDS, June 2022



Project Description

This project worked with the local community in the Fruitvale district of Oakland to investigate, understand, and describe water needs from the community's perspective and partner with the community to come up with a range of possible solutions, potential projects, and funding opportunities. The goals were to expand community awareness of the relationship of the health of the creek and its watershed, to enhance public access and enjoyment of the creek for the natural and cultural benefits it can provide, and to catalyze projects that enhance water quality, habitat values in the creek corridor, or address

Background on the Fruitvale District of Oakland

Demographics

The approximately 50,000 Fruitvale residents are primarily Latinx, comprising 60% of the district population. The student population is between 67%-94% Latinx, 27% of the households in the neighborhood are linguistically isolated (no adult is proficient in English), and of those households, 73% are Spanish-speakers. At the eight schools within 1.2 miles of Lower Sausal Creek, more than 90% of students are considered socio-economically disadvantaged. Residents have lower levels of education, lower rates of workforce participation, and lower incomes than found in the City of Oakland overall (Unity Council & AECOM, 2014).

History of Environmental Injustice and Inequity in the Fruitvale District

The Fruitvale district has a history of racial injustice and resistance. With the push of “urban renewal,” the Nimitz Freeway (I-880) was built through the heart of Oakland’s African American community in the 1950s, disrupting community cohesion, cutting off residents from the economic base downtown, destroying homes, and displacing residents. In the 1960s, further urban renewal, primarily Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) and Main Post Office building construction, further disrupted the community in West Oakland, forcing many of those residents to move to East Oakland. The Fruitvale was heavily settled by African Americans and Latino/as.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chicanos, Latinos, and the Chicano Movement were active in the Fruitvale district. Organizations such as Latinos United for Justice, the Brown Berets, La Raza Unida, and the militant Chicano Revolutionary Party were founded or had chapters in Fruitvale. The Chicano Revolutionary Party had a free breakfast program that the Black Panthers helped them create in the Jingtowntown district of Oakland; they also patrolled the streets of Fruitvale and helped defend it against police brutality. The Clínica de la Raza was created due to the actions of the Chicano Movement to meet the need for a free clinic for the Chicano and Latino community of East Oakland. By the late 1980s the district was becoming predominantly Latino, and today is the cultural landmark for the city's Latino population (City of Oakland, 2020).

In this dense, partly industrial, partly commercial, partly residential, diverse, underserved, and mostly disadvantaged urban part of Oakland, Sausal Creek is either underground in a culvert, or largely inaccessible due to adjacent land uses and private creekside property. The creek’s “invisibility” attracts illegal dumping and homelessness and underscores its reputation as a crime magnet. FOSC’s engagement with students and community members in hands-on restoration in the watershed and experiences in watershed ecology enhanced creek-related awareness and creek access. Discussions on green infrastructure and the development of outdoor recreation were a part of community involvement.



Below I-580, more than half (70%) of the watershed is covered by impervious surface. A FOSC November 2020 Newsletter article presented evidence of the environmental injustice existing in the Sausal Creek Watershed. In particular, low-income neighborhoods (predominantly people of color) have notably less tree canopy and higher levels of impervious surface. “Strong positive correlations have been made between household wealth and critical urban ecology components: biodiversity and higher tree cover rates. By contrast, urban heat islands—resulting from lack of tree and vegetation cover—predominate in low-income neighborhoods” (Stenger, 2020).

In the Fruitvale district, only four small parks provide all the public open space, and two of them are located very close to I-580 (that is, further from the severely disadvantaged communities). In addition, for many years, the Fruitvale Bridge Park, the site of a homeless RV encampment, and Barry Place, a city-owned open space, have been identified as dumping hotspots by the City of Oakland. The Fruitvale is also in the top 20% of California communities for the number of impaired water bodies, environmental cleanups, hazardous waste sites, and groundwater contaminants, particularly in the waterfront zone.



Water quality testing sites begin at the headwaters and continue to the mouth of Sausal Creek as it enters the estuary.

Photo courtesy of Friends of Sausal Creek

Community-Identified Strengths and Assets

Given that listening sessions were held in the Fruitvale-San Antonio Senior Center (Unity Council) and César Chávez Library, it is not surprising that community members were quick to note a rich network of services and employers in Fruitvale. In addition to those two, the Fruitvale district boasts health centers (La Clínica de la Raza and Native American Health Center), schools (15 elementary and middle schools and two high schools), and other nonprofit human service and community development organizations. The Unity Council is a nonprofit anchor in the community, offering educational, financial, and housing development. In 2004, the Unity Council (Social Equity Development Corporation) opened the Fruitvale Transit Village. The “Fruitvale Village” is a nationally recognized mixed-use, transit-oriented development.

In addition to rapid renovation, the Fruitvale district also claims a rich cultural heritage, serving as a cultural center of the Bay Area’s Latinx community since the 1960s. In addition to Latinx-oriented goods and services, authentic Mexican and Central American cuisine, it is the site of widely attended cultural events such as Día de Los Muertos, which draws as many as 100,000 people each year.

Summary of Outreach and Engagement Efforts

FOSC conducted two rounds of data collection for the needs assessments: one from November 2018 to May 2019 and the second from June 2019 to February 2020.

In Round 1, FOSC collected two sets of student surveys, conducted one convenience survey at the 2018 Día de los Muertos event in November, facilitated two listening sessions (Fruitvale-San Antonio Senior Center and César Chávez Library), and held seven community leader interviews.

During Phase 2, FOSC looked for confirmation of previous findings and any new input from the community. FOSC conducted three listening sessions (Fruitvale-San Antonio Senior Center and César Chávez Library), collected surveys from health providers (Native American Health Center), implemented one convenience survey, and interviewed three community leaders. Again, the convenience survey was conducted at the 2019 Día de los Muertos event. In total, almost 300 community members participated in the needs assessment.



Volunteers working on a Sausal Creek cleanup on Barry Place.

Photo courtesy of Friends of Sausal Creek

Data Collection (2018–2020)

Needs Assessment Method	Location	Participants
Listening Sessions (5)	César Chávez Library, Fruitvale-San Antonio Senior Center	72 Participants
Interviews	Fruitvale nonprofits, civic agency leaders, representatives from Unity Council, Brothers on the Rise, Carmen Flores Parks and Recreation Center, Cohen and Bray House, César Chávez Library, Fruitvale-San Antonio Senior Center, Native American Health Center, Holy Names College (Community Outreach), Peralta Hacienda, Sogorea Te' Land Trust /Indian People Organizing for Change (IPOC).	10 interviews with Fruitvale nonprofits and civic agency leaders
Surveys	Middle schools in the Fruitvale district	140 student respondents
Convenience Surveys at community event (2); Health provider survey (1)	Día de los Muertos- Fruitvale (Nov 2018 and 2019) Native American Health Center Jan 2020	71 Respondents
Community Outreach and Education	Location	Participants
Community workdays and stewardship, climate change and cultural walks (5)	Jingletown, Estuary (King Tides), sites (Barry Place, Josie de la Cruz,)	176 Community Members/Youth
Student field trips/restoration (ARISE, ASCEND, Achieve, Brothers on the Rise)	Josie de la Cruz Park, Dimond Park, Tidewater/Fruitvale Bridge Park, Jingletown	181 Students/Youth
Pilot Project	Partners	Participants
Tap Water Quality Workshop (August 1, 2020) Multiple prep meetings	EBMUD, Alameda County Healthy Homes (7)	2 Participants
Open Space/Parks and Trash/ Illegal Dumping	Meetings with City of Oakland staff, Parks and Recreation director, Site volunteers	8 Participants
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Using the mixed methodology described above, FOSC identified, confirmed and summarized key findings. Preliminary data informed follow up questions for subsequent data collection events with target respondents, expanding on and confirming findings. First, this report highlights the key findings summarized from all assessments, then provides findings specific to methods and groups, and finally, presents findings from a survey focused on the topic of tap water quality.

Summary of Key Findings

Through these various assessments administered to diverse groups of respondents, students, community members and partner nonprofits of the Fruitvale community, FOSC identified the following water-related problems and priorities:



Trash and Litter

Illegal dumping, trash, and contaminants in the streets, storm drains and creek were standout concerns often perceived as linked to homelessness, crime, community disengagement, and economic struggles. Creek pollution and contamination, including oil, plastic, and paint, were further detailed under this problem.



Drinking Water

Respondents noted lack of confidence in tap water quality. Many expressed concern that their tap water was not safe and mistrusted the source and safety of drinking water in their homes, often noting misconceptions about the water source and system.



Green Space

Many respondents felt that there were few safe green spaces for children and families and limited access to the creek and outdoor recreation. This is a community that has historically been excluded from green public spaces.

Community Partner Interviews

Through early interviews with nonprofit staff and leaders from the Fruitvale community, FOSC identified water issues and/or problems in the community as well as possible water project ideas. Further, those interviewed assisted FOSC in accessing other community members and groups.

When asked about water issues and/or problems in the community, two areas dominated the interviews. The first focused on the absence of nature or green, open spaces and parks and the lack of access to safe open spaces (9 of 10 respondents). One respondent noted:

“We only really have two parks in Fruitvale [César Chávez and Josie de la Cruz]. Both of these parks are overused, and people don’t often venture out of the neighborhood or to Oakland Hills to go to parks. More parks are needed in the flatlands. Where will the children play in the future if there are no parks?”

The second issue was the illegal dumping, garbage, and toxins in streets, creeks, and parks (7 of 10 respondents). Several respondents noted the intersection of litter and lack of green spaces:

“There is a lack of access to green space and nature. Parks are seen as inaccessible and sometimes dangerous to many families in the area. Many families are too far removed from their natural environment, which results in behaviors such as littering, leading to a dirtier environment. Mentality toward public land needs to be seen as a right, not a luxury, and kids and their families need to take more advantage of accessing it.”

When asked about future project ideas, the top idea, mentioned by all respondents, was daylighting and/or restoration of the creek and green space (10 of 10). One respondent mused that dealing with trash and improving creek awareness could only happen with greater creek restoration efforts.

“The only way to really make a difference in the litter, dumping, etc., and to increase awareness about the creek would be to do a daylighting project similar to the one in Dimond Park. Otherwise, I think that fighting for increased awareness and [creek] promotion is a lost cause.”

“Everything flows into the water...illegal dumping is an issue...Deep East Oakland hasn't had the same reinvestment as other parts of Oakland that have more wealth.”

Other issue areas mentioned by respondents included: drinking water concerns, creation of an Ohlone history and cultural center, and the creation of a community coalition to work on the identified problems.

Listening Sessions

The five bilingual listening sessions provided an opportunity to gather initial information about the most pressing water issues in the community and further explore community issues. FOSC then returned to the listening session sites, presenting and validating key findings. Seventy-two (72) people attended listening sessions; approximately 92% of the participants were Latinx between the ages 20 and 80 years old. The top water issues identified during the listening sessions included the following:

Illegal dumping: mattresses, motor oil, trash, and contaminants and trash and contaminants in the streets and the storm drains. This issue generated the most energy and concern from the participants. Some participants attributed the increased garbage to people experiencing homelessness, crime in the community, and a lack of enforcement of dumping. Participants connected street level trash with their concerns with the pollution and contamination in the creeks and other waterways. As one resident mentioned: “With a lot of cars on the street, oil and gas from these cars enters into storm drains and then the creek.” Other pollution sources mentioned included paint and plastic entering the waterways. One community member mentioned the health effect on the community:

“Fish eat the plastic, and then we eat the fish, and the other animals and everyone gets sick...”

Tap Water Quality: Drinking water in the home. Several different concerns about drinking water were discussed. A mistrust of the safety of tap water was first and foremost. Participants did not trust that their tap water was safe from lead and other toxins. One participant stated:

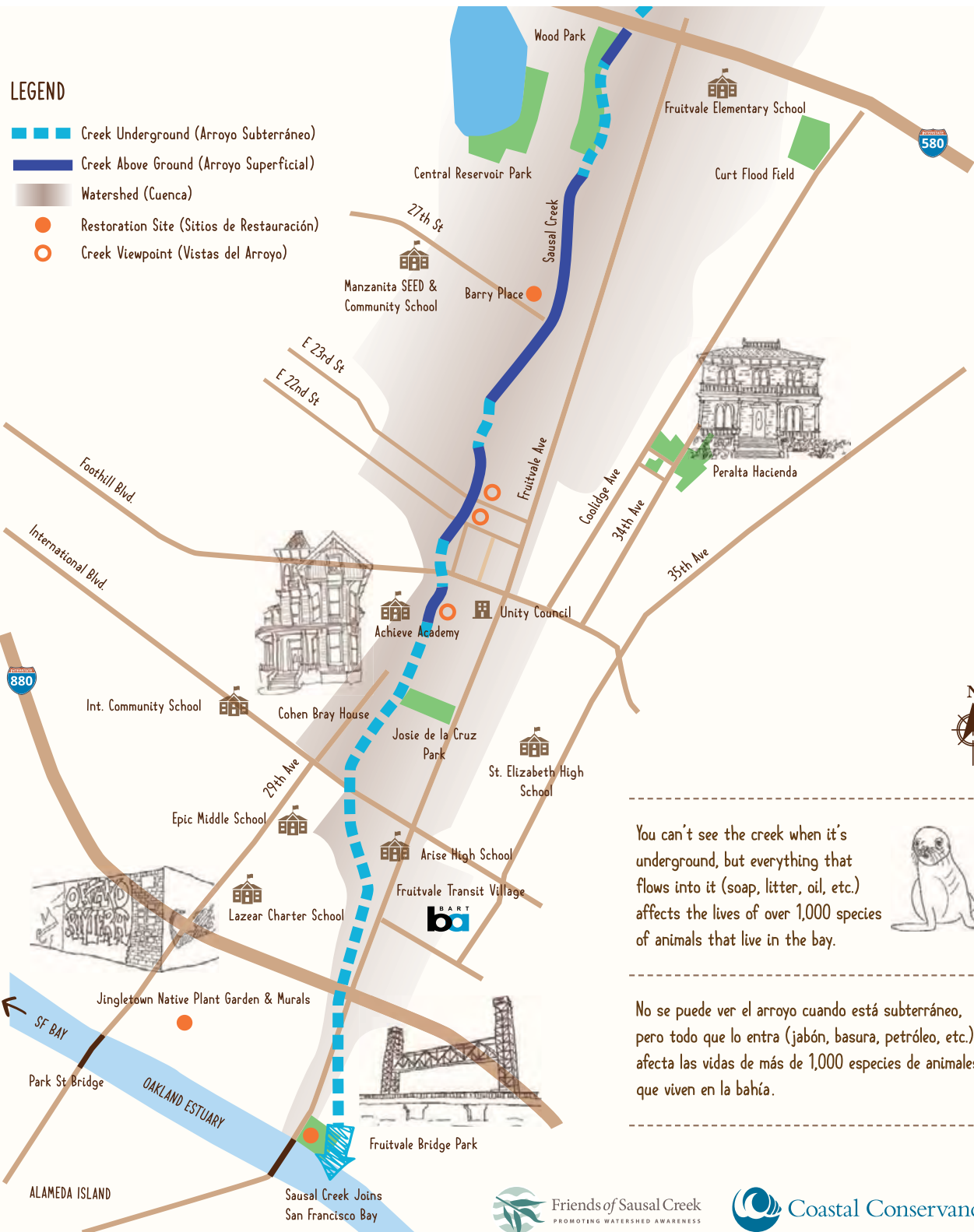
“Almost all water is not safe to drink, we need to buy purified water to cook with and drink.”

In addition to the cost of bottled water, respondents were very concerned with the expense and rising cost of tap water. While only a few participants noted the difference between the source of tap water—East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD)—and premise plumbing water quality issues, several were quick to note the need to contact the utility: “[People] need to call companies to make sure there aren’t toxins and metals in the piping making people sick.” However, no one reported contacting EBMUD about water quality testing.

Limited or no access to green open spaces, creeks, and parks: Participants spoke about both the lack of neighborhood open spaces as well as a lack of access to existing spaces. As one participant noted, “A lot of people don’t know about places to go for green space access, and most parks are too far away. They aren’t aware of how to get to the creek or local parks.” Many commented that there are few or no local safe parks and play spaces for children and that there is not enough access to outdoor recreation for families. Highlighting a lack of green corridors in the Fruitvale, one participant noted the heat in the district, observing, “There aren’t any trees or plants along the sidewalks.”

Preliminary qualitative data collected through listening sessions and interviews informed multiple choice questions for the surveys. In addition, specific themes raised at early sessions were further explored during the second round of listening sessions and follow-up interviews.

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Student Surveys

Using the FOSC environmental education program as a point of entry, FOSC administered a short written survey to four classes from two different middle schools, prior to classroom presentations. Of the 141 respondents from Fruitvale middle schools, 101 were in 6th grade at Bret Harte, and 40 were in 8th grade at Lazear. Students were asked to select the top two most important water-related issues from a list of five. Below are the results:

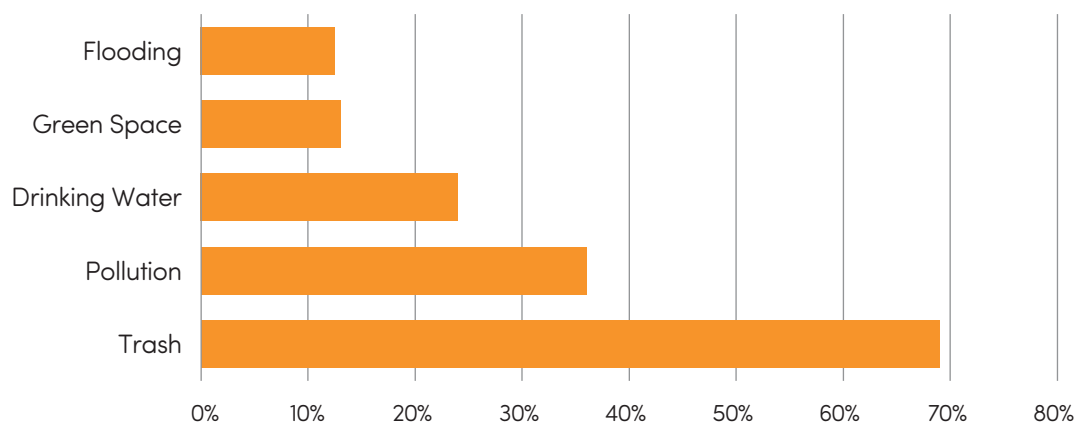
Trash in the storm drains was identified by the most participants (69% of the middle school students).

Next, 36% of middle schools identified pollution in waterways (creek, estuary) as the most important water-related issue

Twenty-four (24%) of the students prioritized contaminated drinking water as a priority.

A lack of green space (parks, areas to see the creek) and flooding were both identified by 13% of the student respondents as the most important water issues.

**Most Important Water Issues Fruitvale Middle Schoolers, 6th and 8th Graders
(n=141)**



When asked about what they would do “if you had a million dollars to improve your neighborhood,” the top responses reflect water-related issues:

Clean up trash in streets and storm drains

“I will pay each neighbor to pick up all the trash,” “I would use it to have a recycling team to go and clean up the trash every weekend.”

Improve drinking water

“I would like to upgrade the water filters,” “get water tested for lead.”

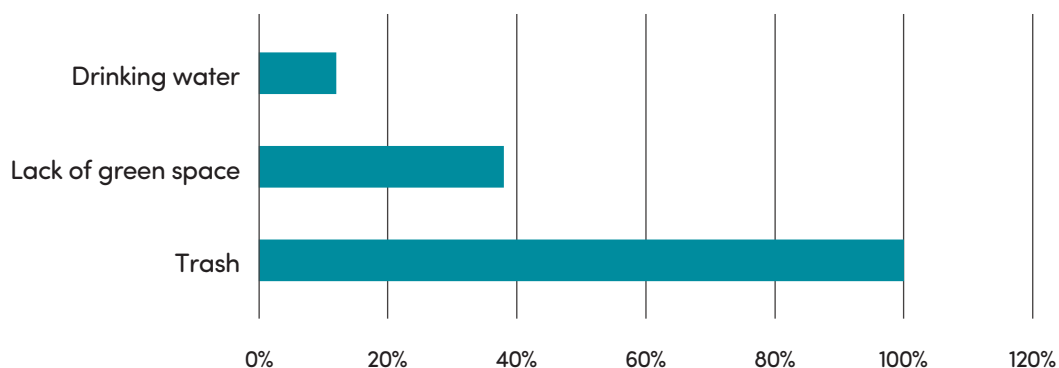
Creek clean-up and restoration, park creation

“I would use my money to get trash out of water and make more parks,” “Make a park nearby with a creek.”

Convenience Survey

During a tabling event at the 2019 Día de Los Muertos Festival, the public was asked to engage in an interactive convenience survey whereby they put a sticker next to the most pressing water-related concern from a list of three. Like the middle school respondents who prioritized trash in the streets and storm drains as pressing concerns, the population of mostly older, primarily Latino/a adults (39) also identified trash as the biggest issue in their community (100% of participants identified it as an issue). Thirty-eight percent (38%) identified the lack of green spaces (parks, planted areas), and 12% voted for drinking water in the home as the issue (unsure about tap water quality, expensive water bill). While there are differences with the rank, trash and dumping and lack of green space/parks are top concerns across the various groups and methods.

Top Water Issues Convenience Survey – 2019 Dia de los Muertos
(n=39)



Focused Survey with Local Health Care Providers

As tap water emerged as a concern during listening sessions, FOSC worked with the Native American Health Center to survey 16 health care practitioners from the Center specifically about drinking water issues among their patients. Although health care providers do not routinely ask about drinking water, they reported that some community members voiced their concerns about tap water and its impact on their health. Of the 16 healthcare providers surveyed, 11 (69%) reported that at least one patient visiting the Health Center in the last three months mentioned concerns about drinking water. Five of those practitioners reported that more than eight community members volunteered concerns about drinking water during that time.

When asked how many patients had symptoms tied to a lack of clean drinking water, 63% of the providers responded that no patients had symptoms but 32% reported that anywhere from one to eight patients had symptoms (hair discoloration, skin rash) tied to drinking water during the three-month period. Those providers noted that clients complained about the taste, color, and/or smell of tap water, including the appearance of sediment.

One health practitioner noted that the perception that tap water is unsafe could be a health risk, as community members will then not drink enough water. A dietician who responded to the survey mentioned that she encourages people to drink tap water, although many prefer to buy bottled. She also noted that there is an absence of water fountains in the Fruitvale neighborhood, which can impact those who do not have a home and thus have no access to tap water at all. These comments from health care providers support the conclusion that tap water is perceived to be unsafe among some Fruitvale community members and is a high priority issue.

Conclusion

Through the needs assessment activities Fruitvale respondents highlighted environmental injustices. Community members noted the lack of open spaces and parks for family recreation and enjoyment; the extensive illegal dumping and trash in public areas (streets/ storm drains, dumping “hotspots”); and they expressed both a lack of confidence in their tap water and concerns that the Fruitvale community does not have same access to safe drinking water as those in the “the hills.” The community’s collective consciousness and concerns are framed by the 2016 Reuters examination that found that that Fruitvale children experience a concentration of lead poisoning (paint- and soil-based) higher than that discovered in Flint, Michigan during the 2014-2015 water crisis.

Fruitvale respondents frequently discussed public safety concerns including robbery and vehicle theft, which are higher than other districts in Oakland. As part of Friends of Sausal Creeks’ Walkable Watershed Concept Plan (2017) similar concerns were voiced. Student surveys cited safety issues from crime and traffic as primary reasons students do not walk or bike in their neighborhood.

Next Steps

- **Continue collaborating with and engaging community members and partners in determining priority pilot projects:** These may include topics identified through the needs assessment, including: tap water quality, trash/illegal dumping and storm drain pollution and increased parks/open space access.
- **Improve open space/park access.** FOSC will continue to work with City of Oakland partners (Public Works – Watershed and Stormwater Division, Environmental Stewards, Park Services, etc.) and gather feedback and seek resources to advance pilot projects and to follow up on the Capital Improvement Project. To that end, FOSC has contracted a feasibility study to explore and detail the development of five sites with the potential for expansion or creation of new parks, open spaces, trails and green corridors. Through additional interviews and focus groups, the community members identified user priorities and contributed to design features for the proposed project sites.
- **Work with the DACTI Program Tap Water Quality Testing Effort to include the Fruitvale community in the testing effort.** FOSC partnered with the Native American Health Center to distribute tap water quality testing kits and will continue collaborating on tap water messaging to the community. FOSC's tap water quality and contamination "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) document developed with community partners (EBMUD, Healthy Homes, City of Oakland) may play a role in the outreach efforts.
- **Convene or connect with existing environmental justice or water groups advocating for the community.** FOSC will continue their involvement in clean water, public land and creek access, and environmental justice issues and draw on the advice of their community partners to help them stay connected to priorities of the Fruitvale community. Key stakeholders in the region include City of Oakland Public Works, District 5 Councilmember Noel Gallo, Keep Oakland Beautiful, Native American Health Center, Clínica de la Raza, Carmen Flores Recreation Center, César Chávez library, Fruitvale schools, Brothers on the Rise, and Unity Council.

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