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County Water Resources Agency gets funding to study flood mitigation efforts along Carmel River.

Katie Rodriguez

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An ariel shot of the Carmel River near Carmel Valley Village, showing debris left behind as the river receded following intense rains in January 2023.

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Those who live along tributaries are, for the most part, well aware that the beauty of living beside running water can come at a cost. It was a point underscored by those who attended a flood project meeting on March 27, many of whom are all too familiar with how quickly the Carmel River can transform.

The challenge, they agreed, is how to mitigate the impacts of flooding in the most timely and effective way.

Atmospheric rivers made 2023 a catastrophic year for Monterey County, most notably in Pajaro, where a levee breach destroyed homes and businesses. But the storms also pushed the Carmel River to historic levels. In January, just a few months before the Pajaro floods, the Carmel River reached 12.69 feet, one of the highest levels on record.

Using the Pajaro floods and an exceptionally rainy year as a catalyst, the Monterey County Water Resources Agency partnered with the office of State Sen. John Laird's, D-Santa Cruz, to propose a study focused on flood mitigation along the Carmel River, particularly near known hot spots in Carmel Valley: the Dampierre Park and Paso Hondo neighborhoods. That proposal was awarded \$230,000 as part of a \$20 million allocation in the state budget; that funding was received at the end of last year.

"\$230,000 sounds like a lot of money, right?" says Ara Azhderian, general manager for the agency. "But for this kind of work, it really isn't. So we want to be very efficient in our use, which is why we wanted to start that public outreach piece."

Several factors make the Paso Hondo and Dampierre Park area the focus of the study. These neighborhoods are especially susceptible to flooding and have been evacuated in recent years, with the added challenge that some homes were built before the area was designated a floodplain.

County Supervisor Kate Daniels saw water seeping through cracks in her own garage floor during storms in 2017 – the result of a raging river with nowhere to go due to storm debris.

The area is also a focus because the berm has changed over the years. The project aims to identify ways to reroute floodwater away from nearby neighborhoods.

The project can be broken down into several components, Azhderian says. Over the next year, they'll work with consulting firm Balance Hydrologics to study river flow under various conditions and update floodplain maps. The last flood model for the Carmel River was completed 15 years ago, as

part of a 2006 FEMA Flood Insurance Study, and will be updated through the Carmel River Flooding Impacts Study. Then, using this new data, they'll create different flood scenarios.

After the study will come the biggest hurdle: turning the model into a buildable design, implementation, and securing needed permits.

"On the quick side of things, you're five years out," Azhderian says. "Five to eight years is reasonable. It could be longer – there are just so many variables at this point."

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