

# Save our neglected streams

## • Start with backing the betterment of historic Billy's Creek in east Fort Myers — benefits will flow to us.

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Many of Southwest Florida's waterways are modest streams, sometimes little better than drainage ditches choked with silt and debris. They absorb pollution and send it on downstream to bigger rivers such as the troubled Caloosahatchee, and ultimately to coastal bays and the Gulf itself.

They also represent a failure to make the most of what can be marvelous natural amenities with the power to change communities.

But there is good news concerning one such waterway, historic little Billy's Creek in east Fort Myers, for which reclamation money is starting to build up. You can make the news even better by supporting the drive to improve this and other neglected streams in the region.

Billy's Creek, which empties into the Caloosahatchee just east of downtown, is the object of the passion of a dedicated band of volunteers. They have explored it, tracked its history, pulled huge amounts of vile trash from it and marveled at the fact that it is still, despite years of abuse and neglect, a lovely waterway.

### URBAN JEWEL

Fort Myers City Councilman Warren Wright sees the creek as the potential centerpiece of an urban park that could help spark the revitalization of a not-so-prosperous part of the city and county. He and the Friends of Billy's Creek, an offshoot of the Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association, or Riverwatch, envision a creek side park with walking trails and retention ponds that will buffer the creek from polluted rain runoff as well as provide some nice water features.

Wright, with critical help from state Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers, pulled off a coup in Tallahassee by hustling up \$500,000 in state money toward restoration of the creek. Fort Myers has pledged \$100,000 and the South Florida Water Management District, \$55,000. A total of about \$2 million will be needed to dredge the silt that chokes a stream that used to be navigable for a mile or so upstream from the Caloosahatchee.

### HELP OUT

Lee County ought to pitch in at least some of the additional money needed. About half of the basin drained by the creek lies outside city limits. Commissioners should be urged to be sympathetic when the city turns to them for help on this.

"It's not just a feel-good environmental project," Wright says. "It's about cleaning up a neighborhood at a fundamental level."

Other cities have seen good things, including investment and rehabilitation, flow from the creation of an attractive physical environment, where people can enjoy natural surroundings, which at the same time protect that environment. Water quality standards will force a serious reworking of Billy's Creek in any case.

We need to clean up our smaller waterways for health and environmental reasons, and to develop them for recreation and community redevelopment where possible.

Let's protect and use these natural gifts.