
Fw: Trail underpass restoration after storms - Item 2.1 El Niño Joint Efforts - 10/13 Joint Meeting

From City Clerk <city.clerk@sanjoseca.gov>

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To Agendadesk <Agendadesk@sanjoseca.gov>

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SJ BPAC Trails Maintenance report 2026 10 05.pdf;

From: Jordan Moldow <[REDACTED]>

Sent: Monday, October 12, 2026 8:05 PM

To: City Clerk <city.clerk@sanjoseca.gov>; clerkoftheboard@valleywater.org <clerkoftheboard@valleywater.org>; board@valleywater.org <board@valleywater.org>

Subject: Trail underpass restoration after storms - Item 2.1 El Niño Joint Efforts - 10/13 Joint Meeting

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I am asking that the Valley Water Board of Directors and the San Jose City Council ensure that their organizations are empowered to collaborate effectively on the maintenance and restoration of creek trail underpasses.

I believe that your top priorities for El Niño should be preparing for storm damage, life safety and emergency operations during storms, and preventing / recovering from flooding of homes and businesses. But below those priorities, I believe that trail underpasses should be a next priority.

San Jose's trails follow their creeks underneath various bridges, and in several locations the trails descend low enough to be within reach of typical winter stormwater. It is intentional and unavoidable for these undercrossings to flood, but it does create obstacles and danger for bicycle commuters who rely on the trails to travel between home, work, and other commitments. The duration of this difficulty is multiplied by several **avoidable** factors:

1. The underpasses are allowed to remain slick with mud for weeks after storms.
2. Some underpasses remain submerged for extended periods of time not because of elevated creek levels, but due to drainage issues that trap floodwater as well as rainfall that collects at the bottom of the underpasses.
3. Insufficient or non-existent communications and dashboards regarding trail closures and re-openings.

The San Jose Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC) has [written about this problem and proposed solutions](#) for the City of San Jose to implement; see attached report excerpt.

Across the responsibilities of Valley Water and the City, trail underpasses are one of the likeliest areas for jurisdictional ownership to be blurry or unknown, for cross-agency friction to get in the way of success, and for needs to fall through the cracks. For the purpose of this Joint Meeting: I ask that the two bodies ensure that cross-agency inefficiencies are not getting in the way of solving these trail underpass problems.

1. According to information shared by the City's Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services (PRNS) staff at the December 2025 BPAC meeting, regulations may be adding complexity and cost to removing mud from the trail underpasses; and this leads to City staff minimizing the number and timeliness of post storm remediation. I ask that Valley Water staff work with PRNS staff to ensure that PRNS has a fully accurate understanding of current waterway regulations, and to identify the cheapest and quickest options for restoring underpasses in a timely manner, while still complying with all applicable state and federal regulations. I also ask that Valley Water ensure that it hasn't created additional hurdles for underpass cleaning. Finally, I ask that Valley Water and the City explore whether any opportunities exist for sharing costs or resources for underpass cleanup: for example, if Valley Water staff have to perform an underpass site visit and find the conditions to be unsafe for trail usage, can they be empowered to improve those conditions while they are on site?
2. One of the agencies should clearly accept responsibility for improving drainage at the worst underpasses, and getting this fixed in a timely manner. If the City is the responsible party, Valley Water should actively assist in getting the improvements done, minimizing bureaucratic hurdles as much as possible.
 - In my experience, the worst underpass for drainage is the Trimble Road undercrossing for the Guadalupe River Trail (GRT). For some reason, it has a wall of sandbags that act to keep water trapped on the trail. The US 101 and Montague Expressway underpasses for GRT are also flood prone, and only have on street detours.
3. The City would probably be the responsible party for communications and dashboards regarding trail closures and re openings, but Valley Water should assist and amplify these communications, and perhaps lend assistance to the City in consuming its relevant data sources. However it happens, the public needs access to accurate trail statuses on a day to day basis.

Please ensure that cross-agency bureaucracy does not stand in the way of draining, cleaning, and re-opening the trail underpasses after storms. This is a critical piece of restoring the City's multi-modal transportation network after storms.

Thank you,
Jordan Moldow (speaking for himself)
Resident of San Jose District 3 and Valley Water District 3
Chair, San Jose BPAC (for identification only)

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Appendix A: Trails maintenance

Situation

Based on staff updates, BPAC discussion, and public comment, it is clear that winter flooding along San José's river trails — particularly the Guadalupe River Trail (GRT) — is **short in duration but long in impact**. While river levels typically recede below trail elevation within 12–24 hours at most underpasses, poor drainage and delayed post-storm cleanup leave mud, debris, and a slick residue ("film") in undercrossings for weeks or even months. These conditions disproportionately affect a few repeatedly flooding underpasses — notably Tasman, Highway 101, Trimble, and Montague on the GRT — yet they effectively disable large portions of the trail network each winter for a trail that sees approximately 750,000 users annually.

At our December 2025 meeting, BPAC held a discussion with Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services (PRNS) to learn about trails maintenance. The discussion highlighted **structural and organizational constraints** contributing to extended underpass hazards. The trails maintenance program within PRNS has limited equipment and staffing, relies on contractors for film removal, and must coordinate with DOT for larger debris. Environmental regulations constrain certain cleanup methods, and coordination with Valley Water on drainage improvements appears limited. By contrast, the neighboring City of Santa Clara clears comparable underpasses (e.g. on San Thomas Trail) more quickly and consistently. The cumulative effect in San José is a perception that trails are deprioritized relative to roadways, despite their function as active transportation corridors.

Recommendations

We respectfully recommend that the City **treat trail underpass flooding and post-storm cleanup as a transportation reliability issue**, comparable in priority to roadway flooding. Because the primary disruption arises after waters recede — not during peak flooding — there is a meaningful opportunity to improve outcomes through faster inspection, staged cleanup, and more proactive resource deployment. Even partial or phased cleaning of slow-draining underpasses could restore safe, passable conditions sooner rather than waiting for full drainage.

We also recommend **targeted operational and capital adjustments** focused on the most problematic locations:

- Benchmark trails maintenance staffing, equipment, and response protocols against peer cities such as Santa Clara.
- Evaluate the cost-benefit of owning specialized film-removal equipment rather than relying exclusively on contractors.
- Pre-budget PRNS–DOT collaboration for predictable winter workloads to avoid delays from real-time interdepartmental requests.
- Leverage existing Valley Water sensors as post-storm inspection triggers and strengthen coordination with Valley Water on drainage maintenance.

These challenges are concentrated in a handful of underpasses for a few months each year, so meaningful improvements are achievable with modest budget impact while significantly improving safety, reducing liability, and restoring confidence in San José's trail network.

These recommendations align with the new Council-adopted *Climate Adaptation & Resilience Plan* (CARP), Measure 4 - PS "Priority Streets and Trails," Strategy PS-1: "Identify Tier 1 and Tier 2 Priority Corridors, trails, and intersections that align with major transit routes and evacuation routes for the prioritized clearing of leaves, branches and debris after major storms."



Figs. 1-3: Photos of the Trimble Road underpass, taken around 10/24/2025, roughly two weeks after the underpass initially flooded. The trail is partially dry and could be partially cleaned, but no cleaning occurs until all water has evaporated and mud has fully caked. Tracked-out mud is a fall hazard in dry conditions and becomes more dangerous with any precipitation.