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DIANE'S CORNER

Perrinville Creek: A sad case of politics and wasted taxpayer money

Posted Friday, August 8, 2025 8:15 am

By Diane Buckshnis

Edmonds Resident, Former City Councilmember

Perrinville Creek was once a thriving, salmon-bearing stream that flowed through Edmonds and Lynnwood. Community groups like the Edmonds Stream Team used it as a teaching creek; it was a vibrant artery in our region's watershed and a living example of environmental stewardship.

But as urban development expanded – particularly the Blue Ridge subdivision in Lynnwood – impervious surfaces like rooftops and pavement dramatically increased stormwater runoff. By the early 2010s, flooding along the creek became routine. In 2012, residents pressed the City of Edmonds to act. The solution? Authorize a new stormwater outflow pipe.

Despite community outcry for more natural alternatives, the City approved the pipe. It diverted water into Browns Bay, and over time, so much sediment accumulated that the bay is now nearly destroyed with sediment overload – becoming a cautionary tale.

In 2020, after a severe flooding event, Mayor Mike Nelson made an even more consequential move. In early 2021, the City illegally plugged Perrinville Creek at the fence line using a pedestrian crossing sign.

Staff plugged the creek without a permit from Fish and Wildlife, without consultation with the Tulalip Tribes, and without council approval. Now, the creek's outflow into a BNSF pipe was blocked, preventing migrating salmon from reaching their spawning grounds.

Nelson claimed it was necessary to protect two homes built in a coastal floodplain from flooding, despite both homeowners not complying to building a mandatory floodplain berm to mitigate flooding. Nelson made a public commitment to a restoration plan, bolstered by \$3.5 million in federal recovery dollars, which later were reassigned.

Progress was slow until a new Public Works director was hired. In 2022, the City spent about \$670,000 on the design of the lower stretch and pledged another \$1 million in 2023 for the entire basin.

Also in 2022, the City applied for a \$350,000 salmon recovery grant through WRIA 8, but was not selected. They were encouraged to reapply, but never did. No reason was ever provided.

Meanwhile, flooding risks persisted. City crews are regularly dispatched during major storms to manually remove boulders and debris that gushes into the 6-foot-deep stormwater vaults and, yes, while standing in torrential rain. One slip could have ugly consequences. Every few years, to perform maintenance work, the City must apply for a permit from the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

When the application came forth in 2024, the City provided an incomplete SEPA (State Environmental Policy Act) agreement, and Robert Bernhoft filed an appeal citing that City's actions in altering Perrinville Creek waters over the years has resulted in adverse impacts to fish and railroad safety, and that the bypass structure and other culverts and pipes should be removed and replaced with a creek that enables successful fish passage and spawning.

BNSF has known that their outflow pipe is cracked and, in a worst-case scenario, a train derailment near the shoreline would be catastrophic.

In 2025, the appeal hearing became a five-day legal ordeal, and Bernhoft reportedly spent about \$50,000. The City? Likely 10 times that amount with attorneys, including a hearing examiner, expert witnesses, and staff.

The result? The case was remanded back to the City for corrections. Yes, the restoration clock for salmon recovery keeps ticking.

Then came another twist: the City applied for an emergency permit for further maintenance work on the creek, as emergency permits do not require a SEPA review.

So, the City decided to bypass the lengthy legal battle outcome and render it now irrelevant, due to a regulatory loophole.

Imagine this: The same money spent on legal defenses and red tape could have funded the first phase of creek restoration.

While people point fingers – at the homes in the floodplain, at growth in Lynnwood, at BNSF's aging cracked pipe – we are missing the bigger picture. The Tulalip Tribes have applied for a grant with BNSF in infrastructure money for Perrinville. We know designs and plans exist. The only thing missing is local political will.

Perrinville Creek could – and should – be like its cousin to the north: Meadowdale Beach. That site once bottlenecked salmon, too, but with federal, state, BNSF, Snohomish County, and agency funds invested in daylighting and habitat restoration. A beautiful near-shore estuary was the result.

Perrinville deserves the same. We need a fish-passable bridge under the railroad, a widened culvert beneath Talbot Road, and the removal of illegal blockages. This isn't a "pipe" dream – it's a viable plan waiting for action.

To the Edmonds City Council: lead.

To the mayor's office: act.

To the citizens of Edmonds and beyond: Remember this story. The next time someone says we can't afford to fix our environment, ask them if we can afford this kind of mismanagement.

Because it's not just a creek that's at stake.

It's our credibility.

And now you know the rest of the story.

Documents relating to this column can be found at [diane buckshnis.com](http://www.diane buckshnis.com) (<http://www.diane buckshnis.com/>).

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