

It takes a community to save a creek!

Mary Rawl, Friends of Billy's Creek

Billy's Creek is an urban waterway flowing through downtown Fort Myers, into the tidal portion of the Caloosahatchee, which is within the study area of the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program (CHNEP). Billy's Creek is a mangrove-arched waterway, potentially unique in all of Florida because it penetrates a city. Parts of the shoreline and most of the watershed of Billy's Creek have been altered by development. Its watershed includes mixed urban land uses, with the majority being residential. Billy's Creek empties into the Caloosahatchee River after it flows under Palm Beach Boulevard. The upper reaches of Billy's Creek cross I-75.

The sources of pollution to Billy's Creek are predominantly from nonpoint-source inputs. Nonpoint sources are those that are diffused and wash into the creek through storm water or shallow ground water. The urban watershed contributes stormwater runoff that generally includes lawn clippings, vegetative debris, sediments, fertilizers, pet waste, oil and other pollutants from roads. The Billy's Creek watershed may also be contributing septic system leachate and graywater (laundry water). In addition, Billy's Creek has a problem with urban debris and trash being directly dumped into the creek or washed into the creek during storm events.

Progress is being made in the efforts to address Billy's Creek's water quality problems. One effort that will likely have a positive impact on Billy's Creek is the Stormwater Master Plan for the City of Fort Myers, which is currently being funded. There is also a Billy's Creek filter marsh

that will be constructed to remove pollutants from the creek. This project is currently in the construction phase. Cleanup events to remove trash from Billy's Creek are also organized periodically.

Billy's Creek is one segment of the Great Calusa Blueway Phase III, a National Park Service-designated National Recreational Trail. The Billy's Creek segment has an active nonprofit volunteer group, Friends of Billy's Creek, that works on educational and grant opportunities.

Approximately \$5 million in funds to date have been awarded for projects on the creek related to restoration, recreation, water quality and watershed planning. The creek has a list of 14 partners, including the CHNEP, working toward common goals, including:

- Design and construction of two water-cleansing filter marshes along the creek designed to take polluted storm water and return it to the creek as clean water.
- Purchase of conservation lands along the creek and the ongoing effort to start a land trust.
- Community planning component to address socioeconomic, historic and cultural significance.
- Development of a watershed plan and greenway/blueway plan.
- Implementation of a stormwater utility plan to address water quality issues.
- Public awareness, including press and events.



- Ongoing GIS and mapping efforts.
- Watershed education in the schools.
- Exotic removal efforts.

According to Jerry Miller, president of the Friends of Billy's Creek, "Every week I see more people enjoying Billy's Creek. It is a navigable waterway that is on the western side of the Greater Everglades Ecosystem. It is a hidden paradise in the City of Fort Myers. Come and experience for yourself the history, natural canopy shade and wild-life — and you never know what else you might see!"

For more information, please contact mary.rawl@gmail.com or 239/849-0964.

Are you working in your neighborhood to improve the natural environment? Let others know about it by sending in an article for *Harbor Happenings*. (See page 2 for details on sending articles to Maran Hilgendorf.)

