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The Arboretum Waterway

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By Dave Jones

THE CREEK THAT WAS — The waterway, built in 1968-69, occupies what used to be the north fork of Putah Creek, which brought floodwater to the town then known as Davisville. A dredging effort in the late 19th century diverted most of the flow to a channel known as the south fork of Putah Creek. In 1948, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built levees at the north fork's mouth (the west end); the levees completely eliminate flow in the north fork.

FROM EAST TO WEST — Whereas the original north fork flowed east, the waterway flows west. This is the result of dredging and grading over the years. When the waterway fills up with storm runoff, excess water goes through a weir and into a holding pond and from there is pumped into a pipe that carries the water to the south fork of Putah Creek.

HOW LONG, HOW DEEP — The waterway is about 1½ miles long, about 2 to 5 feet deep, along the south edge of UC Davis' central campus. A wide portion of the waterway just east of Mrak Hall is called Lake Spafford, named after F. Edwin Spafford, an alumnus who went on to become a longtime UC Davis administrator, holding such positions as assistant to the provost; executive assistant and special assistant to the chancellor; and vice chancellor for physical construction and maintenance. The waterway runs from near the south end of D Street in downtown Davis to the UC Davis Equestrian Center.

MULTIPURPOSE — The university classifies the remnant north fork channel as a recreation and aesthetic amenity, and a biological resource. The waterway runs through the arboretum, established in 1936 and considered today to be the university's landscape centerpiece. Pedestrian and bicycle paths line the waterway's banks. The waterway also serves as a storm water detention pond.

CAMPUS TREASURE — The university's 2003 Long-Range Development Plan states that the Arboretum Waterway should reflect "an environment worthy of our affection" and be part of a "healthy and interconnected natural and built environment."

THE SITUATION TODAY — "The arboretum waterway currently falls short of these principles during the dry-weather season," states an environmental planning document for the improvement project. "Poor water quality conditions have persisted since the arboretum waterway was first created more than 30 years ago. In large measure, the problems of today stem from the original design. The arboretum waterway is a stagnant pond designed to look like a flowing creek."

Sources: Office of Resource Management and Planning; Facilities-Operations and Maintenance; Lake Spafford: An Investigation of Water Quality Options, Denise H. Connors and Jeannie L. Darby; and arboretum archives.

— **Dave Jones**

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