

RIVER SECTION LEFT BARE; CITY CREW MISTAKENLY CUTS DOWN TREES, VEGETATION ON BANKS NEAR DEVARGAS PARK.

By: STACI MATLOCK

Volunteers who take care of a block-long section of the Santa Fe River near DeVargas Park were incensed earlier this week when they found out a city crew had cut down all the willows and other vegetation in that section of the river channel.

"We spent five years nursing that stretch back to health. We were beginning to see birds, snakes and other wildlife," said Ouida MacGregor, chairwoman of the river stewards committee for the Rotary Club of Santa Fe. "It feels like everything we've done there has been for naught."

"They've absolutely stripped everything. All they left was a few of the small cottonwoods," MacGregor said, of the stretch from Sandoval to Guadalupe streets.

In addition to planting and cleaning its section of the river, the club also contributes \$1,000 a year to the Santa Fe Watershed Association for projects that promote and improve that span of the river. Last year during the city's fishing derby, anglers fished off the banks, surrounded by thick stands of willows, young cottonwood trees and flowers tended by Rotarians.

Fabian Chavez, the city's parks director, said the willows will be 4 feet tall again by mid-summer and the wildflowers that have seeded the area will still grow. But Chavez admitted a young parks supervisor made a mistake in directing his crew to cut down all the vegetation in the area except for some trees. "He feels really bad about what happened," Chavez said Wednesday, a day after he went to look at the river channel.

The river between Guadalupe and Sandoval streets now looks like a nicely manicured "park," with shorn grass and scattered young cottonwood trees.

Chavez said he takes full responsibility for the incident. "It is very unfortunate. It shouldn't have happened," Chavez said. "It won't happen again."

Chavez said he met with park supervisors in January to plan pruning and clean up around the city. He said he didn't tell them to cut anything in the river channel. But the young supervisor managing the crew near DeVargas Park thought cutting back the willows and brush would help their cleanup efforts.

The DeVargas stretch is infamous as a dumping ground for drug needles, trash and feces. The supervisor told Chavez the tall brush and dormant willows hampered his

crew's cleanup efforts. "He thought the only safe way to deal with it was to take out all the vegetation," Chavez said.

The river stewards program is managed by the Santa Fe Watershed Association. Stewards volunteer to clean up the river monthly from spring through fall. Sponsors pay \$1,000 a year to adopt a stretch of the river. Some groups, such as the Rotary Club, are both stewards and sponsors.

Pamela Dupzyk, program director of the Santa Fe Watershed Association, said the city crew also mowed down 95 percent of the vegetation in another span, between Guadalupe Street and the DeFouri Street bridge. The stewards for the stretch are REI and Outside magazine.

Dupzyk said this isn't the first time vegetation in the river channel was mowed down by city staff. She said usually it happens because someone decides the river needs to look "better," but doesn't check with Chavez.

Chavez met with parks supervisors and staff again Thursday morning and said he'll put out a memo with specific instructions: No cutting anything in the river channel without first consulting with him, city tree specialist Bob Wood and the river stewards.

He said there also will be joint training between the watershed association and parks staff so they can agree in general on what the river channel should look like.

MacGregor said she knows mistakes happen. But she thinks it has happened too often with the river, and this time it affected years of volunteer effort and donations by her group. "I hold Fabian responsible for not training his people," she said. "It is a typical of the city, hiring someone and not training them."

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