

# Molasses Creek FAQs

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## 1. What is the recent history of this part of Molasses Creek?

A 1,200-foot pipe system carries Molasses Creek underground through Fairwood. This pipe is a fish passage barrier, which means that it prevents native fish from migrating upstream through it. King County is responsible for the majority of the pipe system. However, the City of Seattle is responsible for approximately 440-feet of the pipe system that runs under its property.

The pipe system is about 50 years old. Since 2002 there have been five sinkholes along the pipe system. In 2002, the County repaired a sinkhole located near the downstream end of the pipe within the Fairwood Division 4 Homeowners Association (HOA) park. In 2013 another sinkhole formed within the same HOA park and the County performed a temporary repair. In 2017, the County replaced the downstream end of the pipe with a 100-foot-long concrete box culvert and 30 feet of concrete pipe. Additional sinkholes occurred near the upstream end of the pipe in 2009, 2011, and 2017 in the Fairwood Division 11 neighborhood. Temporary repairs occurred when the sinkholes were discovered. In 2021, the County removed the upstream end of the pipe to daylight 180-feet of the Molasses Creek channel before it enters the remaining pipe system.

## 2. What is the problem the County is trying to solve?

When repairing pipes that are fish passage barriers, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) regulations require that the new project provide fish passage. For the Molasses Creek pipe system, the newer 100-foot box culvert (at the downstream end of the pipe) and the 180-foot daylighted channel meet fish passage requirements.

The County still needs to address fish passage issues for the new 30-feet of concrete pipe installed in 2017, which is not fish passable. In addition to this current obligation, the County is faced with the prospect of future repairs in coming decades that also require fish passage in Molasses Creek.

Simply replacing the pipe with the same kind of pipe will not provide fish passage. The entire pipe system should be addressed as a whole to ensure fish passage, not one segment at a time. The County commissioned a feasibility study to evaluate long-term options.

## 3. What were the options considered in the August 2, 2023, *Feasibility Study Report: Molasses Creek Fish Barrier and Habitat Improvement Project* (“report”) by Herrera Consulting?

Three alternatives were discussed in the report.

- *Alternative 1 (Status Quo) No changes to Molasses Creek and the pipe system* – Alternative 1 looked at the County continuing with inspection and maintenance until funds are available to daylight the stream to comply with state fish passage regulations. Estimated total lifecycle costs are ~ \$25.6+ million. These anticipated future costs are for emergency failure response and

future daylighting costs. This estimate does not include inflation for future costs or near-term inspection or construction cost.

- *Alternative 2 (Current Alignment Daylighting)* – Alternative 2 considered removing the existing pipes, exposing the stream to open air, and restoring the stream’s natural features along the current alignment of the pipe. This would require building fish passable culverts at two road crossings. Estimated total lifecycle costs are ~ \$22.5+ million. These are estimated near term costs of construction and acquisition of at least 4 private properties.
- *Alternative 3 (Historical Alignment Daylighting)* – Alternative 3 considered removing the existing pipes, exposing the stream to open air, and restore the stream’s natural features in approximately the alignment of the stream as it existed before Fairwood was developed in the 1960s. This would require building a fish passable culvert at one road crossing. Estimated total lifecycle costs are ~ \$22.1+ million. These are estimated near term costs of construction and acquisition of at least 6 private properties.

#### **4. What does the report recommend?**

The report recommends *Alternative 1 (Status Quo)* as it is the only feasible option for the County to pursue at this time given funding and property constraints. In addition, the report recommends that planning efforts occur to support future daylighting of Molasses Creek.

#### **5. Why isn’t the County daylighting the creek at this time?**

At this time, the County does not have sufficient funding for *Alternative 2* or *Alternative 3*, both of which include daylighting the creek. For context, the primary funding source for this project is the King County surface water management (SWM) fee, which is a fee collected on each developed parcel in unincorporated King County. The SWM fee raises \$43-\$44 million per year and the funds are used for projects and services across the unincorporated area, including habitat restoration, stormwater facility maintenance, water quality improvement projects, and related scientific research.

#### **6. When will the County know its long-term plan and whether daylighting of the creek will occur along the current alignment or the historical alignment?**

The County is currently developing a long-term plan for the site that will be completed by spring of 2024. We do not know which alignment will be feasible, as it depends on further analysis of site conditions, acquisition feasibility, and utilities management.

#### **7. Is the County continuing to inspect the pipe?**

Yes, the County uses remotely operated vehicles with cameras to inspect the pipe. The most recent inspections occurred in 2011 and in 2022.

#### **8. What is the condition of the pipe?**

The 2011 camera inspection showed some cracks on the top of the pipe in some areas. The camera inspection was compared to the 2022 inspection video. The technology between the years has changed, however the inspections do not seem to show the cracks getting larger over the 11 years and the pipe has not changed shape.

**9. When will the County next inspect the pipe? What do you look for?**

Pipe inspections generally occur during dry parts of the year, and we plan to inspect the pipe again in summer 2024. We will inspect the pipe for structural defects, material that needs to be removed, and vermin. Defects can include joint separation, cracks, gaps, holes, deformation, or collapsed sections. The inspection will also verify pipe shape and size and location of the manholes.

**10. How will the County address and repair pipe system defects that develop over time?**

Defects in a pipe system can be repaired in several ways:

- Lining damaged portions of the pipe;
- Excavating and replacing the damaged segments;
- Excavating and daylighting a portion of the creek; and/or
- Drilling or jacking (pushing or pulling) replacement pipe into place underground and connecting it to undamaged segments in an excavated pit.

All of these repair actions would trigger regulatory requirements to provide fish passage to upper Molasses Creek.

**11. How will the County ensure compliance with fish passage regulations if repairs are needed for the pipe?**

Any repair activities on the pipe will trigger state and federal regulatory requirements to provide fish passage to upper Molasses Creek. If a repair is needed for the County-owned portion of the pipe system, fish passage could be provided by either replacing the existing pipe with a much larger culvert or digging up and removing the pipe and daylighting the creek. However, achieving fish passage at this location is challenging due to the presence of private property ownership over the pipe, making extensive excavation infeasible. Also, the best approach for fish passage involves working on the entire stretch at once, rather than segment by segment, which poses an additional challenge for such a long pipe.

Nonetheless, the County is working with the WDFW and the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe to develop a plan to address fish passage barriers on Molasses Creek. This plan may involve short-term actions to restore fish passage at another nearby site, mitigating the delay in achieving immediate fish passage on Molasses Creek. Long-term actions, such as acquiring property over the current pipe, are also being considered to enable daylighting of the creek.

**12. What should I do if I think there might be a sinkhole appearing?**

Common signs of potential sinkholes are depressions, small holes, or cracks that appear in the ground surface above the underground pipe. If you notice depressions, small holes, or cracks on your property or in the neighborhood, please call King County’s Stormwater Complaint Hotline at (206) 477 – 4811.

**13. Is the County going to condemn my property for this project?**

The County prefers to work with willing sellers and uses condemnation only as a last resort when a property is needed for public safety or an essential public facility. Acquisition of property for large County projects often takes many years to complete.

**14. What is the process for selling your property?**

If the County decides to seek property acquisition for this project, it will conduct an appraisal of the property. If there is sufficient budget, an offer would be made to the seller for fair market value (FMV) of the property. King County is required by statute to pay FMV for the purchase of real property. Our office retains independent, state-certified appraisers to estimate fair market value. A Review Appraiser then reviews the appraisal report to certify that the report is accurate and has a reasonable estimate of FMV. The seller pays the real estate excise taxes and any owed property taxes at closing, and the County pays for all other title and escrow charges.

**15. Are moving expenses or other incentives considered?**

King County, just like any other private party purchaser, does not contribute to the seller's moving or relocation expenses. The County does assist renters displaced by the sale of the property, as long as they meet the qualification criteria under the 1970 Federal Uniform Relocation Assistance Act.