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For a Clean and Healthy San Francisco Bay

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BAY PROTECTION PARCEL TAX SET FOR JUNE BALLOT

By Jay Gamel

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority voted to place a 20-year, \$12 parcel tax on the June ballots of the nine counties that border the San Francisco and San Pablo bays, including Sonoma, Marin, Napa and Solano counties. If approved by every county, the taxes would raise \$500 million over 20 years to fund critical Bay restoration and flood protection projects, according to proponents.

Discussing long-term issues facing Sonoma County last month, First District Supervisor Susan Gorin listed the possibility of impending sea level increases that could swamp Highway 37 and impede travel across the North Bay.

According to Jim Wunderman, president & CEO of the Bay Area Council, the money would be spent on “wetlands restoration projects to reduce pollution of Bay waters, expand wildlife habitat, expand trails and recreational opportunities along the Bay shoreline, and protect shoreline communities from flooding.”

“By acting now to restore our wetlands,” said Wunderman, “we can improve the Bay ecosystem for fish and wildlife, while protecting huge portions of the Bay’s shoreline from storm surges and rising seas.”

Residents polled by the Authority showed a high degree of support for the tax, with 70 percent of likely June voters saying they’d vote for it. Nearly 11,000 Bay residents have already signed an online petition supporting the tax measure.

Already prone to winter flooding, Highway 37 has been the subject of an innovative study by the U.C. Davis Road Ecology Center, sponsored by Caltrans District 4, that seeks to involve multiple agencies and nonprofit groups, including the Sonoma Ecology Center and the Sonoma Land Trust. Both local groups have been active for years in North Bay conservation issues and projects.

The Center’s first report, available at www.hwy37.ucdavis.edu, concluded that future action will be needed to address both rising water levels and North Bay wetland preservation, and listed five possible scenarios: doing nothing, reinforcing the existing roadway, building a causeway, rerouting traffic through Napa and Sonoma (highways 121, 116), and building a tunnel. While an expensive alternative, the causeway was seen as the preferred solution. As it exists now, the highway acts as a levy against water getting to the wetlands in many places, preventing effective restoration. Making that an even bigger barrier would exacerbate wetland restoration efforts.

In January, the Sonoma County Water Agency loaned the district \$250,000 to help pay expenses for getting the measure before all nine counties.

“The Bay Area is already beginning to experience the impacts of climate change, and the best science available shows that flooding due to sea level rise and extreme weather will intensify, putting low-lying communities and billions of dollars of critical infrastructure at risk,” said Mike Mielke, senior vice president of Environment & Energy for the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, part of the effort to get this before voters. “The best answer is to work with nature to help protect us all from this. Doing nothing is not an option.”

In addition to directly generating \$500 million for the Bay, funds raised by this measure could leverage additional state and federal funds, potentially tripling the available pool of funds for Bay restoration, public access, and keeping communities safe from flooding.

Passage of the measure will require approval by two-thirds of the total voters casting ballots cumulatively across all nine Bay Area counties in the June 2016 election.