

MountainView
VOICE

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**PARCEL TAX COULD BOOST SOUTH BAY
WETLAND RESTORATION***By Kevin Forestieri*

Wetland restoration and flood protection in the South Bay, including Mountain View, could get a big boost in funding this year through a special parcel tax measure on the June ballot.

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority's governing board agreed last month to put a \$12 parcel tax for all nine Bay Area counties on the June 7 ballot. The 20-year tax would generate about \$25 million each year, which would go to pay for myriad flood protection, habitat restoration and clean-up projects across 100,000 acres of bay shoreline.

The restoration authority, established in 2008, plays an important role in leveraging funds for restoring and improving the bayland ecosystem, according to Paul Kumar, political director for Save The Bay. Kumar said more money is needed to move quickly and build up a natural wetlands habitat, which acts as a natural barrier to floods, in order to combat sea-level rise in the coming decades.

"We won't be able to accelerate these projects without a significant funding source to keep them ahead of the pace of sea-level rise," Kumar said.

Leading up to the announcement of the proposed parcel tax, the authority put together a list of over 100 existing projects that could be eligible for restoration authority grants once it actually has money to shell out.



Shoreline just north of the city of Mountain View that will be converted into natural wetland habitat in the coming years. Photo by Michelle Le.

The largest project on the list is the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration project, an ambitious plan to restore over 15,000 acres of industrial salt ponds back into natural wetlands. The project began making improvements and rebuilding wetland ecosystems in 2008, and future phases of the project may benefit greatly if the parcel tax is approved.

The second phase of that restoration project, now under environmental review, would help to restore roughly 700 acres of wetlands habitat just north of Mountain View. The project would include breaching a long-standing levee on the shoreline that would reintroduce sea tides to the ponds — an important step in allowing marsh plants to thrive in the region, according to the project's environmental report.

The added benefit of wetland restoration, Kumar said, is that it serves as a natural flood protection system that works much better than the “dilapidated” existing levee system that is badly in need of repairs and upgrades.

“The greater wetland presence serves as a set of large, natural sponges that helps to absorb and filter water,” he said. “It serves as a natural barrier to the harshness of the tides.”

Mountain View Mayor Pat Showalter, who serves on the restoration authority’s governing board, said the parcel tax revenue would be a boon to local agencies trying to tap into federal and state grant money, but need matching funds. She said the measure would “work beautifully” to provide the local matching funds, and could also directly fund projects as well.

“Scientists spend so much time chasing money,” Showalter said. “We could improve the quality and the caliber of the work being done.”

The parcel tax would earmark half of the revenue for specific regions of the Bay Area based on population, which means the South Bay will receive at least 12 percent of the total estimated \$500 million in revenue. The other half would go towards priority projects, to be determined by the governing board.

Showalter works as a water resources engineer at the Santa Clara Valley Water District, which acts as a lead organization on some South Bay coastal improvement projects. Because of this, Showalter said, she would have to recuse herself from some grant decisions.

“If there’s a conflict of interest, I’ll need to sit out for that vote,” she said.

Since the announcement last month, Kumar said, there’s been an “incredible” amount of support for the parcel tax, with over 70 public endorsements including environmental groups and the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. A big part of the appeal, Kumar said, is that it can help vulnerable shoreline communities like East Palo Alto that are unable to leverage resources for shoreline improvements.

“It helps economically disadvantaged communities that can’t afford measures and protections that are critical to them,” he said.

Showalter said the bay is a defining characteristic of the region, and that it’s essential to keep the bay shoreline clean and healthy for future generations.

“When someone asks you where you live, you say the Bay Area,” she said. “This is the touchstone of our area. It’s ours and we need to protect it.”