

YES on AA

CLEAN AND HEALTHY BAY

Vote YES on Measure AA
For a Clean and Healthy San Francisco Bay

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\$12 ANNUAL BAY TAX ON JUNE BALLOT: FIRST-EVER NINE-COUNTY PARCEL TAX PROPOSED TO SUPPORT RESTORATION

By Samantha Weigel

In an unprecedented move asking voters across all nine Bay Area counties to help fund critical tidal marsh restoration and flood protection projects, environmental groups and the business community are partnering to promote the “Clean and Healthy Bay Ballot Measure.”

This week, the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority, a seven-member government agency, unanimously moved to propose a \$12 parcel tax in the June election — a first of its kind regional effort anticipated to raise \$500 million over 20 years.

From protecting vital public infrastructure like bustling freeways to re-establishing habitats that support a variety of species, the funds generated by the tax could help restore nearly 30,000 acres of wetlands that naturally promote resiliency against sea level rise.

“I’m optimistic that the Bay Area voters will approve the parcel tax because there’s no question that voters identify with the Bay and that it’s a unique and highly valued resource,” said San Mateo County Supervisor Dave Pine, who chairs the restoration authority board. “This is really an unprecedented regional collaboration to take on a very challenging regional issue, which is the health of the Bay and providing natural flood protection.”

Should two thirds of voters agree, the funds would be geared toward restoration projects that reduce pollution, expand wildlife habitat, enhance trails and recreational opportunities as well as protecting shoreline communities — and billions of dollars worth of infrastructure — from flooding.

The measure has already received significant and widespread support from dozens of elected leaders as well as environmental and business advocacy groups such as Save the Bay, the Bay Area Council, the Silicon Valley Leadership Group and Audubon California.

What’s at risk

Scientists predict the seas will rise 3 feet by the end of the century — which could affect nearly \$60 billion in homes, businesses and infrastructure such as airports, roads, office buildings, wastewater treatment plants and entire neighborhoods. Furthermore, a study commissioned by the Bay Area Council found that an extreme storm could cost the region more than \$10 billion.

As the issue broadly affects people across the Bay Area, deriving a dedicated funding source for critical restoration projects has prompted the business and environmental communities to join in promoting the proposed tax.

“There’s a lot of public infrastructure that’s at risk around the Bay; highways, railways, electrical facilities, infrastructure, airports, sea ports, water and wastewater treatment facilities. It’s huge. So the fact is that we are extremely fortunate that what was began by the environmental community over a decade ago has convinced the business community that there are really broad benefits to this. Ultimately, this is an environmental effort that happens to have some important economic benefits as well,” said Adrian Covert, policy director with the Bay Area Council.

Environmental groups have estimated that restoring over 30,000 acres of publicly-owned tidal marsh to create at least 100,000 acres of healthy Bay wetlands could cost about \$1.5 billion.

“For \$1.5 billion, we could go a long way toward protecting \$10 billion. So the math just works,” Covert said.

Righting a wrong

Research shows restoring wetlands and tidal marshes is an extremely effective and fairly simple way to not only support wildlife habitat, but protect against floods, said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay, a nonprofit credited with helping create the authority and promote the tax measure.

Prior to the California Gold Rush that attracted people to the region, the Bay was a thriving estuary supporting more than 200,000 acres of tidal marshland. But over the years, new developments and expanding population led to widespread infill or blocking off by dikes — which has taken a toll.

By the 1960s, nearly 90 percent of the Bay's wetlands were gone and by 1999, only 40,000 acres remained. Now, scientists agree the Bay needs at least 100,000 acres of tidal marsh to improve its health, Lewis said.

Over the last few decades, restoration efforts have managed to support about 45,000 acres of functioning wetlands and this tax measure would support the revival of another 30,000 acres, Lewis said.

"This is a tiny tax for a huge benefit and the benefits are something that all of us share. We all benefit from a healthier Bay and more resilient communities and economy," Lewis said.

While the process of restoration is simpler than some may think, it can be costly. Typically, restoring a marshland involves removing an existing dike or levee then allowing the natural reintroduction of water and sediment. But it can involve expensive prep work such as creating new levees to protect surrounding developments from the restored marshlands, Lewis said.

In many cases, subsidence in the land caused by the former dikes requires new clean dirt or sediment to be brought in to raise the elevation back to sea level, Lewis said.

But the results are worth it and proven. Referring to the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration project, Lewis said "some have gone from open water ponds to re-vegetated thriving tidal marsh in as little as five years."

"The opportunity to do another 30,000 acres of tidal marsh is unmatched on the West Coast, there's nothing like it. ... There's really no other urban area in the country that has such a large natural treasure in its midst as we have with the Bay," Lewis said.

Who, how and where

Lewis said the vast majority of the currently publicly owned Baylands apt for restoration is owned by the federal government. The remainder is primarily owned by the state, special districts, conservation groups and land trusts.

The authority would serve as a grant distributor and while no specific projects are earmarked funds, Pine said its intended to be distributed throughout the region and referred to a sample project list. In San Mateo County, examples include shoreline restoration projects at Coyote Point, Bair Island, San Francisquito Creek and more.

While the \$500 million generated from the parcel tax is only a third of what's needed to restore the 30,000 acres across the entire Bay Area, officials note it would go a long way toward leveraging state and federal dollars.

There's a discrepancy amongst what the federal government spends toward preserving the San Francisco Bay — which has a multi-billion economy but receives just \$5 million. Other great bodies of water such as Puget Sound, the Great Lakes and the Chesapeake Bay receive between five and 60 times more federal support than our local Bay.

Now, officials are stepping up to ask local residents to participate in restoring the Bay, at least in part, to its former glory days.

Before it's too late

"One of the reasons this work is urgent is if we don't begin some of the restoration of these tidal lands now, they will become flooded and we won't be able to restore them. It's not going to happen tomorrow, but we can't wait around 30 years if we want to preserve them," Pine said.

Pine, who's been active in sea level rise preparation, said it's not often that government moves to get ahead of a problem and the missing link in a regional solution has been a funding source.

"We know that sea level rise will have an enormous impact on the Bay and San Mateo County in particular. We are taking concrete action that will help mitigate those risks. Unfortunately, it's too common that the problems in the future are ignored until they get much, much worse and when that happens, the cost escalates extraordinarily. So I believe this restoration work will pay for itself many times over."

In working to ensure two-thirds of voters across Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, Sonoma and San Francisco counties support the efforts; the coalition of business and environmental groups is seeking to raise \$5 million toward its campaign. Thus far, officials said they've raised about \$800,000.

All property owners, regardless of their proximity to the Bay — such as those in far reaching areas like Half Moon Bay, Livermore, Morgan Hill and Santa Rosa — would be subject to the new tax. But officials promoting the efforts are confident the measure will earn the needed support.

Covert said the agencies did extensive research and polling of voters before landing on the \$12 parcel tax.

"The Bay has transformed remarkably since the Gold Rush and not always for the better. This is our opportunity to do something big and to restore the Bay to something closer to its former glory days for our children, our grandchildren and for fish and wildlife," Covert said. "People have a powerful connection to the San Francisco Bay and they want to see it healthier and safer and they're willing to invest \$1 a month to leave it in a better condition."

Moving forward, Pine and Lewis said they hope the measure can serve as an example of how to address other pressing issues that require a collaborative approach from the housing crisis to mitigating traffic.

"I hope it will also encourage the region to look at other regional solutions to solving regional problems," Lewis said. "One of the big challenges we have in the Bay Area is we're divided into nine counties and 100 cities and there's so many important regional challenges that we should be able to address."