

The Press Democrat

TUESDAY, MARCH 1, 2016

SONOMA COUNTY LEADERS SUPPORT JUNE REGIONAL TAX MEASURE TO FUND RESTORATION

By Angela Hart



Photo credit: Beth Schlanker/The Press Democrat

Wetlands provide a scenic view from the rail line south of Petaluma, California on Tuesday, October 11, 2011.

Sonoma County supervisors on Tuesday voiced strong support for a first-ever regional ballot measure this June seeking a \$12 parcel tax increase. It would generate \$500 million over the next 20 years for all nine Bay Area counties to pay for wetland and wildlife habitat restoration projects in the San Francisco Bay.

Though the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority, an independent agency spearheading the initiative, has power to place the tax increase on the June ballot, Bay Area counties are required to call a special election on behalf of the agency.

County supervisors on Tuesday approved the special election, the same day as the primary on June 7.

Officials with the Sonoma County Water Agency, which put up \$250,000 in January to advance the measure, said passage would generate \$45 million for the North Bay over 20 years and shore up additional state and federal dollars for key wetland restoration projects, including along Sonoma Creek, the Petaluma River and in the San Pablo Bay.

“This is so important to preserve and protect the jewel that is the San Francisco Bay that defines this entire region,” said Grant Davis, executive director of the Sonoma County Water Agency. “We’ve got projects in that area ready to go today that could benefit from these dollars.”

Sonoma, Marin, Napa and Solano counties are guaranteed a portion of the \$45 million. Funding would be approved on a project-by-project basis, Davis said. Measure AA requires a two-thirds vote region-wide to pass.

Board of Supervisors Chairman Efrén Carrillo applauded the measure, arguing that it will help Sonoma County and the entire region adapt to climate change.

Waters in the southern part of the county are expected to rise three to five and a half feet over the next 100 years, according to Jessica Martini-Lamb, an environmental resources manager for the Water Agency.

“This recognizes the ... ecological importance of the bay,” Carrillo said. “It’s really historic.”

Supervisors Susan Gorin and David Rabbitt, whose southern district boundaries include sensitive wetlands and low-lying urban areas prone to flooding, said if approved, the county would also be well positioned to pull down regional grants to further local restoration programs. Money could also be allocated for flood management and pollution prevention programs and efforts to increase public access to natural lands.

Half of the funds from the measure — \$250 million — would be distributed to each Bay Area county based on population. The other half would be available for communities through competitive grants.

“I’d love to see Sonoma County get a larger share,” Rabbitt said. “When the water does rise, it’s mostly going to go north and south ... so we stand to benefit over the long run.”

Roughly 55,000 acres of wetlands in the San Pablo Bay are eligible for protection and restoration projects, Davis said.

Ted Eliot, a Sonoma resident who was co-chairman of the 2006 effort to extend the local sales tax that funds the Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District through 2031, said Measure AA would advance the district’s goals.

“I’m so pleased and delighted and thrilled for your support of this measure,” Eliot told supervisors. “It’s going to be the most important conservation program going on the ballot since Measure F in 2006, which extended the Open Space District 20 more years.”