

Greening the Bay With Measure AA

The Clean and Healthy Bay parcel tax may be this generation's chance to step up and restore the bay before it's too late.

By Sarah Phelan

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Alameda wetlands

PHOTO BY ARIEL NAVA

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Like many Bay Area residents, Assemblyman Tony Thurmond enjoys the San Francisco Bay Trail. “There’s perfect access to the bay,” he said of a recent visit to Richmond’s Point Isabel Regional Shoreline. “It’s a beautiful place to walk and look out at the bay, and my daughter spends almost every birthday at the beach at Miller/Knox.”

But in recent years, Thurmond has been alarmed to learn that climate change could destroy critical San Francisco Bay wetlands. “As I hear it, the impacts could be sooner and deeper than anticipated,” he said.

Research shows that sea level rise is speeding up and that surging tides and severe storms will erode bayland habitat unless thousands of previously diked acres are restored to tidal wetlands as soon as possible.

In fact, the Pacific Ocean has been creeping up on us for years: Tidal gauges beneath the Golden Gate Bridge show that the bay has risen 8 inches since 1900. But scientists now warn that sea level rise will quicken as the century unfolds, lifting boats, eroding shorelines, and inundating low-lying areas.

A 2012 report by the National Academy of Sciences estimated that the bay would rise 12 inches in the next 20 years, 2 feet by 2050, and up to 5 feet by 2100. And in 2015, a consortium of Bay Area scientists and governmental agencies warned that we must act now to ensure that bay ecosystems continue to thrive.

“Projections show that if we don’t act, rising seas and greater erosion will cause the baylands to shrink,” stated the consortium’s 2015 report, “The Baylands and Climate Change: What We Can Do.”

A dwindling supply of sediment in the bay is compounding the problem, explained Letitia Grenier of the San Francisco Estuary Institute, which contributed to the report. “Marshes no longer have enough sediment coming down from the watersheds to let them keep up with the sea level rise that is projected for the coming decades,” said Grenier, noting that recent models suggest we could lose most wetlands by 2100.

Rather than ringing the bay with expensive sea walls and levees—the historic response, which destroyed marshes—the report recommended restoring thousands of acres of wetlands.

“The success we have already achieved with baylands restoration provides us with the opportunity to continue this work,” the report concluded. “But this opportunity is available only if we act now.”

That is why Thurmond and a broad coalition of elected officials, business associations, and environmental and community groups support Measure AA, otherwise known as the Clean and Healthy Bay parcel tax. Placed on the June 7, 2016, ballot by the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority, this region-wide

parcel tax would be dedicated to restoring and protecting the bay—creating what Thurmond calls “a green defense.”

“In the Bay Area, we have a great amount of beauty, but also we experience a high level of risk,” Thurmond said. “Measure AA would help create a natural habitat for birds and fish and other wildlife and a safe barrier or buffer zone for dealing with storms and rising seas—a way to help absorb large waves and flood waters.”

Measure AA would levy an annual \$12 parcel tax for 20 years on property owners in the nine-county Bay Area, starting July 1, 2017. The funds would be used to restore habitat, reduce pollution, improve water quality, protect communities from floods, and increase shoreline access. Over its lifetime, the measure would raise \$500 million to fund projects, including the restoration of 35,000 acres of wetlands and creation of 15 more miles of the bay trail.

“If it passes, it will secure key funding for wetlands,” said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay. “Measure AA allows all of us in the region who love the bay to help the bay at a very small cost.”

Save the Bay was founded in the 1960s to combat rampant filling and development that reduced the bay’s area by one-third and destroyed 90 percent of its tidal marshes. Today, the bay is cleaner and healthier than it has been in five decades, and several large-scale wetland restoration projects are already underway. But all these efforts lack steady funding.

“Scientists say our bay needs more than twice the current acreage of wetlands to be vibrant and strong, which means we must act now,” Lewis said. “San Francisco Bay is crucial to the region, not just as a really important natural treasure, but as an economic engine. It’s a big reason why many of us live here and locate businesses here. It’s the main reason people come to the Bay Area as tourists.”

Save the Bay posted on its website a list of 100 projects expected to be eligible for Measure AA funding. These include restoration of the South Bay Salt Ponds; enhancement of tidal wetlands on Bair Island; maintenance of levees at Eden Landing Ecological Reserve; installation and maintenance of trash collection facilities near creek mouths on the Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline; completion of tidal marsh restoration projects at Sears Point; construction of soft shoreline at China Basin; removal of contaminated fill and stabilization of

eroding shoreline at Point Isabel; and management of the endangered least tern colony, restoration of shoreline, and extension of the bay trail at Alameda Point.

“Save the Bay and others worked for many years on developing an inventory of projects for wetland restoration that did not have funding,” said Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia, who sits on the authority’s board. “The group identified that what was lacking was a local funding source that can leverage state and funding revenues. It took lots of years to create something regional with buy-in from so many groups and with projects in every county.”

So far, Gioia hasn’t seen any opposition to Measure AA, although the fact that property owners in all nine counties surrounding the bay would have to pay an equal parcel tax could raise objections since residents who live far from the bay potentially would not benefit as much as those who live closer. Others consider parcel taxes regressive since rich and poor pay the same amount.

“There’s always some group against any new tax,” Gioia said. “But \$12 a year is a pretty modest investment, which will pay enormous dividends. We know it’s a challenge to pass any new funding and a two-thirds majority is a high threshold, but it’s important for the environment, it’s fiscally responsible and it protects public safety. ... Our quality of life is so impacted by the bay; we all can relate to it, whether we live near the shore or not. What happens in one part of the bay affects another part of the bay. It’s why a regional approach makes sense.”

Measure AA already has buy-in from top business leaders, including the Bay Area Council and the Silicon Valley Leadership Group—powerful business associations whose involvement speaks volumes about the bay’s economic importance to the region.

“It’s a dollar a month, and by improving the wetlands, you filter out the pollution for cleaner water for fish and birds and habitat for other wildlife,” said Bay Area Council policy director Adrian Covert. “You can expand hiking trails, and you can also protect low-lying areas.”

In 2015, the Bay Area Council released a study that estimated that an extreme weather event, “the 150-year storm,” could cause about \$10.5 billion in damages to the bay’s economy. “That number will increase, and we know this effort would

actually get us on the right track to providing flood protection to certain areas in the bay,” Covert said.

But will a \$12 annual tax be enough? The Bay Area Council estimates that it would cost about \$1.5 billion to restore all wetlands currently listed as eligible for funding from Measure AA.

“So, Measure AA would bring us a third of the way,” Covert said.

Today, there about 44,000 acres of tidal marsh in the bay, down from a historic high of 200,000 acres, and the current goal is to return it to 100,000 acres. Lewis says that raising funds to complete work on 35,000 acres that is currently waiting for restoration would go a long way toward achieving that goal.

“It’s about taking diked areas that don’t have vegetation, which the bay needs now, and turning them back to tidal marshes, which re-vegetate with native plants, creating a biologically diverse habitat where, right now, there is not enough,” Lewis said. “That benefits endangered species like the clapper rail and the salt marsh mouse, but it also benefits a whole host of other birds, fish, and wildlife.”

And over time, tidal marshes capture carbon from the atmosphere and store large amounts in marsh soils. “Tidal marshes sequester carbon through their root system, and carbon gets buried in the sediments over time,” Lewis said. “Even if we restore all tidal marshes, it’s still a small portion, but it’s better than not sequestering any carbon at all.”

Measure AA also would expand the Bay Trail, which brings people closer to nature and wildlife. “The bay defines our region and the trails we build would be constructed for hikers, joggers, bicyclists, birdwatchers, people in wheelchairs and children,” said Bay Trail project manager Laura Thompson.

To pass, Measure AA requires a two-thirds supermajority vote; since this ballot measure raises revenue, it needs more than a simple majority of votes. That’s a high threshold, but political heavyweights like Measure AA co-chair Sen. Dianne Feinstein believe it’s a target we collectively can’t afford to miss, on behalf of the future.

“The bay is the very heart of our region’s identity, and is vital to the economic and ecological future of California,” Feinstein said. “It is up to us to protect and restore it for the benefit of our children and our children’s children.”

Some may question the timing of the ballot measure, wondering if it would be better to wait until November, when voter turnout is expected to be higher.

“The November ballot is going to be so crowded that it will be much more difficult to educate voters, and much more expensive to communicate about this measure in that noisy atmosphere,” Lewis said. “June is an opportunity to get more attention.”

What does Gioia expect if Measure AA doesn’t pass?

“In the short term, we lose opportunities for additional access to the bay, we lose fish and wildlife habitat, and the bay doesn’t get cleaner,” Gioia said. “In the long term, we start feeling the affect of sea level rise. It’s more cost effective to start addressing sea level rise now rather than in 20 years.”