

EAST BAY TIMES

Gov. Newsom's \$1.5 billion litter cleanup campaign kicks off in Richmond with promise of new jobs



RICHMOND, CA – JULY 7: Governor Gavin Newsom, center, greets Caltrans workers at a press conference to announce the Clean California campaign on Wednesday, July 7, 2021, in Richmond, Calif. The \$1.1 billion effort expands state and local litter abatement efforts and provide thousands of jobs, including for people exiting homelessness, at-risk youth, veterans, formerly incarcerated individuals, local artists and students. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group)

By [SHOMIK MUKHERJEE](#) | smukherjee@bayareanewsgroup.com |

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RICHMOND — Calling California's highways, train stations and bus depots "too damn dirty," Gov. Gavin Newsom announced Wednesday that the state will pump \$1.5 billion into creating thousands of jobs for an all-out cleanup effort.

“Time to use our tax dollars a little bit more appropriately,” Newsom said about the Clean California initiative unveiled during a visit to Richmond, the Bay Area leg of a campaign road trip he’s taking across the state to spread the word. “People want to see the results of their hard work.”

In addition to sending work crews to pick up trash and litter along freeways and at transit stations, the three-year program also will aim to engage communities about good garbage disposal practices to prevent future littering, Newsom said.

Caltrans, which already is responsible for cleaning up trash strewn along its highways and state routes, will be placed in charge of the program. Agency director Toks Omishakin predicted that California Clean will “get people excited about public spaces across this state again.”

Many of the new jobs will go to homeless people, veterans and former inmates, the governor said. Their goal will be to eliminate 1 million cubic yards and 17,000 tons of litter over the next three years.

“The hope is to train folks for career pathways up and down the state,” Newsom said. With the one-time funding, the governor said he wants to create about 11,000 jobs in all, although he didn’t elaborate on the specific kinds of positions they’ll be and how to apply for them. A Caltrans spokeswoman later said job specifications will be posted on the agency’s website once they’re finalized.

At 7.9% in May, California’s unemployment rate remains higher than the nation’s and the state has yet to recover the millions of jobs lost during the pandemic.

The initiative also will provide grants to local artists and students to paint murals and create art installations at train and bus stations as part of the beautification effort. A third of the total funding will go directly to local governments so they can allocate the money on their own.

Newsom said the \$1.5 billion total price tag is a major scale-up from \$80 million set aside for cleanup in the past, thanks to a “record surplus” this year of more than \$80 billion — a stark [reversal of fortune](#) from [the \\$54.3 billion deficit](#) the state had projected at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. State lawmakers approve a \$286.2 billion budget in late June for the new fiscal year that began July 1.

This was the governor’s second visit to Richmond in three months. He came to the city in May to propose the cleanup program and, during his appearance there, picked up trash around Barrett Avenue near Interstate 80 along with city leaders.

Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia, who attended Wednesday’s press conference, said both Richmond and the county have been hard-pressed to deal with all the illegal dumping of trash off highway overpasses.

“We need more money to do this work, but the money isn’t the only thing — it leverages getting community involvement,” Gioia said in an interview about the need for programs like Clean California.

Asked why he chose Richmond as the backdrop for the cleanup campaign’s official launch, Newsom replied he loves the city and region and praised Gioia’s local leadership on the issue.

Caltrans, which will hire and manage workers for the cleanup efforts, has [drawn criticism in the past for displacing unhoused residents by clearing encampments on state property](#). When that was pointed out during the press conference, Newsom strongly defended the agency and maintained that sending homeless people to better living situations is the right and ethical thing to do.

“There’s nothing compassionate about people living in encampments — period, full stop,” he said. “For people that advocate on behalf of those living in encampments when this state is putting up unprecedented resources and alternatives, one has to question the motivations.”

The event took place at a park-and-ride on Hilltop Drive in Richmond, across Interstate 80 from the Courtyard by Marriott Richmond Berkeley.

Homeless people have been sheltered at that Courtyard by Marriott during the pandemic, one of the many vacant hotels repurposed as shelters by the state-funded Project Roomkey program that Newsom launched with great fanfare early into the pandemic.

To show how jobs such as those being created through Clean California can turn lives around, officials at Wednesday’s event introduced Terry Billingsly, a Caltrans employee and Sacramento native who praised the agency for giving him a career path after he was released from incarceration 18 months ago.

“During this time, I’ve gotten married to my dear wife Jennifer, I’ve been reunited with my children, I have a home in Valley Springs (in Calaveras County), I have a bank account, a Harley — life is good,” Billingsly said.

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