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Effort on to save Bay

By Dana Yates

It would take \$1.43 billion and a special tax district to restore the San Francisco Bay wetlands to its previous pristine condition, according to a recently released report on financing such a project.

Save the Bay, a 46-year-old organization aimed at restoring and protecting the Bay, released the report this week. The report estimated, for the first time, the total projected cost to nearly double the tidal wetlands in the Bay, from Vallejo to San Jose. "Greening the Bay: Financing Wetland Restoration in the San Francisco Bay" identifies inadequate funding as the main obstacle to re-establishing 100,000 acres of tidal wetlands — including Bair Island in Redwood City.

It suggests creating a regional special district to oversee funding as the best way to overcome the financial obstacles. The special district would cover the entire Bay Area and allow for special taxes to be levied in all or select areas of the district, said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay.

The report also indicates a strong majority of Bay Area residents support some sort of tax to help the restoration process.

"[The report] is a case statement to elevate the conversation for local elected officials," Lewis said.

It could be the first step in getting all cities and agencies on board for a massive district.

The district could be formed a number of different ways. Already existing smaller districts could merge into a Joint Powers Authority, the state Legislature could create a special district, the public could be asked to vote on it or the Local Agency Formation Commission, Lewis said.

Once the district is created, it could look at ways to collect money. It could tax the entire district or just areas in which it is working on a special project, Lewis said.

A recent poll, commissioned by Save the Bay, indicated 83 percent of Bay Area residents would be willing to pay \$10 per year in taxes or fees to restore wetlands that would result in cleaner Bay water, provide flood control benefits, enlarge the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge and increase shoreline access for the public.

The poll was conducted as research and is not being used to gauge public opinion for a specific tax, Lewis said.

A tax equivalent to \$4 annually for each Bay Area resident over the next 50 years would restore thousands of acres of thriving wetlands on the shoreline and reverse more than a century of degradation that reduced



Erik Oeverndiek/Daily Journal
An effort to restore the San Francisco Bay — including Redwood City's Bair Island — could take \$1.43 billion and a special tax district.

the size of the Bay by one third, Lewis said.

Only 5 percent of the Bay's original wetlands remain because of mass urbanization in the region. People have diked and drained marshes to create agricultural fields and salt ponds and filled wetlands for development, according to the report.

The 14,000-acre Bair Island in Redwood City was purchased for restoration in 1999 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for \$15 million. To date, \$1.82 million was spent on planning and implementation and another \$8.1 million is necessary to complete the restoration and another approximate \$2.4 million to monitor and maintain the wetland over the next 50 years, according to the recently released report.

In 1999, when the Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals was published, about 40,000 acres of tidal wetlands existed in the Bay – 60,000 acres short of a goal of 100,000 acres. Since then full tidal action has been restored in Napa, Hayward, Oakland and other sites, according to Save the Bay.

Government agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, the California Coastal Conservancy and private organizations and land trusts have purchased an additional 36,176 acres of restorable Bay shoreline. Completing these planned restoration projects will nearly double the Bay's tidal marsh, according to Save the Bay.

To reach the 100,000 acre goal, an additional 22,912 acres need to be purchased and restored from remaining diked historic Baylands and salt ponds. Specific project sites have yet to be determined and the \$1.43 billion estimate does not include the future cost of purchasing and restoring these acres, according to the report.

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