

December 8th, 2021



Protecting Marin Since 1934

Dennis Rodoni
President
Marin County Board of Supervisors
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By e-mail (BOS@marincounty.org)

Dear Supervisors:

Marin Conservation League believes that renewing Measure A in 2022 is not an option; it is a must!

From 2013 to the present, we have witnessed accomplishments across the county, made possible by Measure A – a transformation in public investment that has been truly phenomenal! Revenues from the ¼ cent sales tax authorized by Measure A have been leveraged over and over, bringing into the county matching grants, donations, and other external sources of funds for the benefit of both environment and the people of Marin. MCL will devote our efforts to ensuring that the measure will be renewed!

But we urge you to return the expenditure plan to the *existing* 65 – 20 – 15 percent allocations that have been so successful in benefiting the entire county, subject to fine-tuning discussed below:

65% to parks and open space (including fire risk management and equity – subcategories discussed below); 20% to help preserve and enhance the farmlands that cover almost one-third of the county; and 15% to cities and special districts, where every resident has an opportunity to weigh in on local environmental and recreational priorities.

MCL believes that the revised expenditure plan does not tell the whole story. Two proposed shifts in allocation are of particular concern and call for wide public education.

Wildfire risk management on County Open Space and Parks

The revised expenditure plan would reduce funds from farm preservation and special land acquisition programs in order to bolster wildfire protection. Certainly wildfire is a high priority – with reason – but is the public aware that County Parks is already spending at least 20% of its portion of Measure A funds (\$2M annually) on strategically managing vegetation to reduce fire risk on open space lands to protect adjacent homes? The current expenditure plan does not reveal this as an existing line item. Nor is the public aware that County Parks is working in close partnership with fire agencies and, notably, the Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority, which is receiving \$19,000,000 a year of property (structure) tax dollars to fund a wide array of fire risk protective

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programs, primarily on private lands. The partnership is particularly focused on managing vegetation in the interface between open space preserves and defensible space in developed neighborhoods.

The public appears also to be unaware that county parks and preserves occupy less than 10% of all public lands in Marin County. Residents look around and see endless vegetation on public lands presenting the risk of wildfire. In fact, the vast majority (90%) of Marin's public lands are federal, state, or water-district-owned. In this critical time, they are all working together to reduce the risk of wildfire to our developed communities. Marin County Parks Department is responsible for managing one-tenth of these lands. Because the Department is already doing its work in reducing wildfire risk on the preserves, MCL recommends that this be called out in the Measure A Expenditure Plan as a line item under the County Parks allocation. The public needs to be fully aware of this ongoing work.

Acquisition of special lands

Moving funds into fire risk management would also mean losing half of the Measure A funds designated for acquiring environmentally sensitive lands that have long been targeted. Acquiring such properties generally takes many years and often a chance opportunity. Taking advantage of such opportunities has been a critical piece of County Parks' strategy for many years. As land costs continue to rise, a Measure A fund for this purpose has given the County the ability to leverage – take advantage of grants or windfalls that require a match – and negotiate advantageous purchases. Since 2013, four important properties have been added to existing open space, enabled by Measure A. MCL supports keeping this Measure A subfund at its present level, but also urges that its use be expanded to enable appropriate capital improvements on new land acquisitions.

Preserving and restoring Marin's farmlands

Almost one-third of the County comprises an extensive agricultural landscape, the majority of it in rangelands connected by a network of creeks and streams. Although privately owned, these working lands serve broad environmental and public purposes in supporting diverse wildlife habitat, abating wildfire risk through managed grazing, producing local food, managing water quality, providing a rural landscape that attracts 1,000s of road cyclists and tourists, and, above all, maintaining clean air and sequestering carbon. A recent \$1 M grant to enable Marin County Resource Conservation District to assist farmers in restoring and enhancing their riparian corridors, sequestering soil carbon, and improving their land's resiliency to climate change testifies to the importance of Marin's farmlands in meeting Marin's Climate Action goals.

MCL supports renewing Measure A funding of farmland preservation at the current level of 20%. At the same time, MCL proposes allocating one-fourth of funds to the Marin County Resource Conservation District and the other three-fourths to easements. Conservation easements not only assure that agricultural lands will be maintained in perpetuity, but also that the ranchers will be dedicated to conservation practices. The MRCD serves a critical function in implementing restoration projects and carbon farm plans. Further, MRCD-led projects should not be limited to

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lands under easement. All willing farmers deserve their assistance! In keeping with the intent above to embrace all farmlands in potential Measure A funding, MCL proposes renaming the program “Farmland Stewardship Program.”

Other factors: County Parks personnel; equity programs

- In addition to managing vegetation for both biodiversity and fire fuel management on 16,000 acres of preserves and managing landscapes on 2,700 acres of parks, Measure A has made possible a wide range of improvements to both parks and open space preserves. Much of the effort has been devoted to maintaining and repairing/replacing what we have – restoring eroding trails, replacing aging facilities, repairing drainage and other infrastructure. Measure A has also enabled hiring natural resource specialists as well as seasonal aides to carry out extensive work on the ground. MCL requests, as the popularity of recreating in the county’s open spaces, already at record levels, continues to grow, that ranger and equivalent personnel resources be increased, to ensure adequate presence for education of new visitors and enforcement of regulations – and to serve as an effective reminder that the goals of the preserves are to protect sensitive natural resources for the enjoyment of future generations, and to ensure a safe and rewarding experience for all visitors.
- Aided by Measure A funds, the County Parks Department has been extraordinarily effective in reaching out to under-represented communities and diverse populations – in being inclusive in planning facilities and in organizing visitor programs, volunteer opportunities, and other public programs. MCL recommends that a specific line-item be called out in the Expenditure Plan that expands on these efforts and explicitly budgets for them.

In conclusion, we commend the Marin County Parks Department for its rigorous management of the existing Measure A and for all it has accomplished, and look forward to a renewed Measure A that generally conforms to but also improves on the programs that were allocated in the original measure.

Sincerely,



Robert Miller
President



Nona Dennis
MCL: Parks and Open Space Committee

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