

FAQs for Proposed Regional Parks Funding Measure

Why is the Board of Supervisors considering a Sonoma County Regional Parks sales tax for the November ballot?

Beginning with the creation of Doran Regional Park in 1967, Sonoma County has gradually built a parks system that is arguably among the most beautiful and diverse in California. The system today includes 56 parks, trails and beaches along the world-renown Sonoma Coast, Russian River, Sonoma Valley and the uniquely beautiful landscapes in between.

The creation of the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District in 1990 gave Sonoma County a special mechanism to purchase open space and agricultural lands and has resulted in the addition of key parklands. The 2006 renewal of the measure allows the District to spend no more than 10 percent of District revenues for “initial public access” on lands transferred to park agencies. This funding has been used to provide basic development at Taylor Mountain, North Sonoma Mountain, Tolay Lake, Riverfront Park, the Laguna de Santa Rosa Trail, Cloverdale River Park, and additions to Hood Mountain. The District now has a number of other properties awaiting transfer to Regional Parks. However, the District’s primary purpose is the conservation of open space and agricultural land, so no spending beyond basic access is allowed and no operations or maintenance support is available after three years from the date of transfer.

Meanwhile, the use and popularity of Regional Parks is increasing. The parks now have more than 24,000 annual members. Attendance has increased 38 percent over the past five years to 5 million annual visitors. The parks are integral to residents’ health and quality of life, and tourism surveys show outdoor recreation and natural beauty are what attract Sonoma County visitors.

The growing demand for parks, the escalating operations costs, the backlog of maintenance needs, and the increasing threats to natural resources are putting pressure on Regional Parks to raise fees for parking, camping, summer camps, picnic sites, and other services. County general fund support – which is 18 percent of Regional Parks’ annual budget - has not increased since 2008, even though Regional Parks has added major parks and services. The department is additionally supported by fundraising, partnerships, and volunteer labor, which are not often stable funding sources. Without a stable funding source, it is likely that park expansions will be delayed, trail improvements will be put off indefinitely, visitor fees will increase to maintain the status quo, and health, recreation and education programming will remain limited.

It has been 26 years since Sonoma County voters approved a local measure for environmental protections, and they have never been presented with a county parks measure. Sonoma County’s parks and natural resource needs have increased dramatically in the past 26 years, but the long-term sustainability of the parks system has not been addressed. Most Bay Area counties have funding measures to support both open space and parks. This measure will give Sonoma County voters an opportunity to do the same.

How would the measure affect me?

The proposed measure would create a half-cent sales tax in unincorporated Sonoma County for 10 years and generate an estimated \$9.5 million annually. Anyone who buys a taxable good outside city limits will contribute to this proposed tax revenue, regardless of where they live. County tax data shows the No. 1

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taxable good in unincorporated Sonoma County is wine, followed by gas station purchases, construction-related purchases, and restaurant meals. The bulk of the taxable spending outside the city limits is discretionary and is not tied to a person's place of residence.

Because the proposed sales tax is .005-cents, the additional tax on individual purchases would be minimal. For example, the additional tax on a \$25 bottle of wine would be 12 cents. The added tax on a \$100 restaurant meal would be 50 cents.

Why would the sales tax apply only to unincorporated areas?

City sales taxes are already high, around 9 percent and are about 1 percent higher than in unincorporated areas. To add to the city sales tax rates would create a burden on the municipal taxing capacity and a potential obstacle to future measures.

Residents of many cities already support their local parks through special tax measures or property assessments. Although most Regional Parks are located in unincorporated areas and are maintained by county employees, the Regional Parks are not supported by a special county tax or assessment.

Why is the proposed sales tax a half-cent?

A half-cent sales tax in unincorporated Sonoma County would generate an estimated \$9.5 million a year, which Regional Parks considers to be an appropriate amount to address its most-urgent priorities. (By comparison, a quarter-cent sales tax collected countywide would generate \$20 million a year.) The vast majority of countywide sales tax revenue is generated within city limits, so a quarter-cent or one-eighth-cent tax in unincorporated areas would generate too little to adequately address Regional Parks' long-term needs.

Where can I find a list of the projects this tax revenue would be spent on?

A detailed expenditure plan is available as part of the report to the Board of Supervisors on July 19 and is online at SonomaCounty.ca.gov/Board-of-Supervisors/Board-Meetings. The expenditure plan is also on Regional Parks' website, sonomacountyparks.org, and in Regional Parks' office, 2300 County Center Drive, Suite 120A, Santa Rosa. The plan details how the funding would be dedicated to deferred maintenance and unmet operational needs (30%); increased natural resource and watershed management and stewardship (15%); new trails and access to properties transferred by the Open Space District (25%); community engagement, expanded environmental education, health, and recreation programs (10%); and improvements to existing parks and facilities (20%). Adhering to the measure is a special tax, Regional Parks must adhere to the expenditure plan in allocating the tax revenue.

Do polling results support a Regional Parks measure?

Sonoma County voters have been polled on the potential for a Regional Parks measure several times in recent years. The latest poll of countywide voters was conducted in June 2016 and shows 75 percent would support a parks measure. A poll conducted in March 2016 shows Regional Parks' favorability rating at 91 percent. Regional Parks plans to conduct a final poll of unincorporated residents and present the results to the public and the Board of Supervisors before the Board makes its final decision regarding placing the measure on the ballot.

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The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District is funded by a countywide sales tax. Why doesn't that tax also support parkland the District acquires?

Due to its voter-approved mission, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District can purchase lands for recreational purposes and transfer those lands to Regional Parks, but it cannot pay for the long-term operations, maintenance or programming. The Open Space District currently funds three years of public access and maintenance costs for the parklands it purchases. Parks like Taylor Mountain, North Sonoma Mountain, the Laguna Trail, Tolay Lake, and Riverfront were acquired by the Open Space District with its tax funding but now have no dedicated funding for long-term operations, maintenance or public programs. The general fund revenue Regional Parks receives from the county has not grown in proportion to the amount of acreage transferred by the District. Without a funding source, future parkland transfers likely will be further delayed and parking and other visitor fees likely will be increased to pay for the cost of managing new lands.

How much does the County spend on Regional Parks now and how has that amount changed over the years?

- Regional Parks' \$26.4 million budget for 2016-2017 includes a \$4.8 million contribution from the county's general fund. This represents 18 percent of Regional Parks' total budget and is the same amount the county provided in 2008, despite Regional Park's expenses increasing 26 percent since then. From 2011 through 2014, the county's general fund support dropped to \$3 million to \$3.5 million annually. General fund contributions have increased incrementally as the county recovers from the recession but have yet to exceed pre-recession spending.
- The county also contributes a recurring \$2.6 million in transient occupancy tax to Regional Parks, and this money is reserved for projects that attract and benefit overnight visitors.
- Other than the general fund and transient occupancy tax contributions totaling \$7.4 million, Regional Parks' major revenue sources include fees for parking, camping, and membership and intergovernmental revenues, all of which are subject to reductions due to various factors.
- Regional Parks in the current fiscal year will spend its budget on operating and maintaining 56 county parks, trails, beaches and marinas, including more than 2,000 acres added to the system in the past four years.

How will this Regional Parks measure affect other important priorities, like road maintenance?

A parks measure in unincorporated areas will not prevent the Board of Supervisors from pursuing future measures for other services. A stable source of income solely for parks purposes will help ensure that Regional Parks will not become a greater burden to the general fund.

How would the annexation of Roseland affect the proposed tax revenue?

If Roseland is annexed by the city of Santa Rosa, the sales tax revenue generated by the proposed parks measure would decrease by approximately \$280,000 a year. That estimate is based on the results of a study by the city.