

The Climate Connection

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Local Initiative Would Strengthen Wildfire Preparedness and Preserve Open Space

By Chris Benz

Volunteers are currently collecting signatures to put the “Napa County Wildfire Preparedness, Watershed Protection and Open Space Preservation Act” on the November ballot. This initiative, sponsored by the Napa Land Trust and Napa Firewise, creates a half-cent sales tax to fund wildfire mitigation, watershed protection, and open space preservation across the county. If approved by voters, it is expected to raise about \$23 million annually.

Half of the funds would go toward wildfire safety, and half would go to the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District. This would provide a dedicated funding source for the District, which has had to rely on grants since it was formed by voters in 2006. The initiative would bring Napa County in line with Sonoma and Marin Counties, both of which use a voter-approved sales tax to fund their parks and open space districts.

Money for wildfire mitigation would be used to protect parklands, watersheds, and evacuation routes, finish forest management fuel reduction projects, and conduct maintenance on projects that have been completed in addition to supporting the work of public engagement and defensible space needs for residents in twenty-four Fire Safe Councils.

“The County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) contains five hundred plus projects,” said Napa Firewise CEO Joe Nordlinger. “Close to three hundred of those have been implemented. If we implement the balance, the maintenance dollars needed will be about \$10 million a year.”

He pointed out that there is a lot of work to be done in the watersheds of local reservoirs that supply water to the cities and towns.

“Land around the reservoirs, both burned and unburned, needs a tremendous amount of work from an ecological forest health standpoint. This includes the areas around the reservoirs and along the riparian creek corridors that feed these reservoirs. Achieving this will provide wildfire resilience and watershed resilience.”

According to Melanie Parker, CEO of the Napa Land Trust, the initiative would also allow the Land Trust and the Open Space District to partner on developing new parklands closer to the cities.

“We could act on several properties in the queue in the next three years, if the funding comes through,” Parker said.

“We have been able to do a lot with a little over the past twenty years,” said Chris Cahill, general manager of the Open Space District. “Our eleven full-time employees take care of 14,000 acres

of land. It's enough to keep our parklands safe and clean, but we have to rely on volunteers for a lot of the trail building and invasive plant removal projects."

The Open Space District manages the state parks in Napa County, the Oat Hill Mine Trail, the popular Moore Creek Park, the new Suscol Headwaters Park, and several others. Like Parker, Cahill would like to see new parks closer to Napa's urban areas.

"We see full parking lots at Skyline Park and Alston Park," he said. "These close-in parks are loved, and we need more. However, the District has had to turn away land that was offered to us because of a lack of funds. We've leveraged the county's grants at a ratio of 3 to 1, meaning we turn every dollar from the county into 3 dollars. But many grants require 40-50% matches from local funds, and we have not been able to qualify for those grants."

Dedicated funding would also allow the District to extend the county's regional trail system and build Napa County sections of the Bay Trail and Bay Area Ridge Trail.

Expanding the outdoor education program would be another Open Space District priority. The District currently offers a summer camp, a junior ranger program, field trips, and hikes guided by volunteers. Cahill would like to have interpretive rangers leading hikes in the parks.

"They could explain the ecosystems and the history of these places, and tell the story of this beautiful county we live in," he said. "This could be a major draw to visitors and a huge amenity to the people who live here."

Residents can support these improvements by signing the petition for the initiative this May and voting for the measure in November.

Actions you can take:

1. Learn more about the initiative at <https://www.saferresilientnapa.org/>
2. Explore the Open Space District's parks and trails at <https://napaoutdoors.org/about/>



Volunteer crew working on the trail at Suscol Headwaters Park

Photo credit: Napa County Regional Parks and Open Space District