

Focus Groups with South Bay Voters

Presentation of Focus Group Findings



Prepared for
San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority



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Methodology

- ❑ 2 Focus Groups in Sunnyvale, California, May 10, 2011
- ❑ Participants were voters from Sunnyvale, Mountain View, Santa Clara, or Milpitas
- ❑ Voters who are strongly anti-tax and anti-environmental restoration, AND/OR voters who are strongly pro-tax and pro-environmental restoration were excluded.
- ❑ Both focus groups were moderated by Ruth Bernstein of EMC Research.
- ❑ **Group 1:** Participants were initially told that a potential measure to provide funding for Bay restoration would cost \$10 per parcel per year
- ❑ **Group 2:** Participants were initially told that a potential measure to provide funding for Bay restoration would cost \$20 per parcel per year

Focus Groups

Focus groups are by design, qualitative, not quantitative research.

- ▶ They are not representative
- ▶ Somewhat un-natural environment
- ▶ Window into one moment in time & place

These groups were conducted to assist in the design of a quantitative study. These findings are specific to the groups and will be tested in a follow-up telephone survey.



Key Findings

- ▶ “The Bay” is the San Francisco Bay Area
- ▶ Voters value the Bay and feel responsible for cleaning it up.
- ▶ Size Matters: \$10 is better than \$20, and 10 years is better than 20 years.
- ▶ Give voters every reason to vote Yes with oversight, audits and senior exemption
- ▶ Focus on “the whole Bay” and emphasize the benefits—like cleanup, safety and the environment—not the details

“The Bay” is the San Francisco Bay Area

- ▶ Thinking about the Bay makes voters feel proud of their home. They think of the uniqueness, beauty, and greatness of the Bay Area.
- ▶ Voters associate the Bay with San Francisco:
 - ▶ Even though South Bay residents are close to the south end of the bay, when they think of “the Bay” they think of San Francisco.



*“Pac Bell
Park”*



“Home”



*“The Golden
Gate Bridge”*

Voters think the Bay is polluted

- ▶ When voters hear “San Francisco Bay,” they think about pollution (especially on the south end and in Fremont)
- ▶ Because the Bay is surrounded by cities, voters think pollution is inevitable.
- ▶ They are not sure the Bay is safe to fish or swim.



“Santa Clara has highest density of superfund (sludge) in the country.”

Voters value the Bay and feel responsible for restoration

- ▶ Even those who don't use it for recreation fully understand that the Bay is important to the Bay Area economy, climate, ecosystem, and identity.
- ▶ They acknowledge human responsibility for the pollution and want to clean, restore the Bay to health.

"[The Bay is an] integral part of the climate and economy. The Port of Oakland is a huge economic factor for the region... San Francisco is huge for tourism... the Bay is a huge part of our Mediterranean climate here. I love it."

Size Matters: 10 is better than 20

- ▶ Voters react very positively to \$10/parcel/year for Bay wetlands restoration.
- ▶ For some \$20 also seems reasonable, but it was clear that \$10 was truly minimal while \$20 was not.
- ▶ The lower the tax amount, the easier it is to vote for it without questioning it.
- ▶ For those who were opposed, the amount of the tax didn't matter.
- ▶ Likewise, a 10 year sunset is better than 20 years. Although the Phase I survey findings did not reveal a difference between 10 and 20 years, participants in one group said 20 years is too long.

Give voters every reason to vote Yes

- ▶ Make it hard for cynical voters to reject a measure by including:
 - ▶ Senior exemption
 - ▶ Oversight committee
 - ▶ Annual audits
 - ▶ 10 year sunset

Focus on “the whole Bay”

- ▶ Given descriptions and pictures of potential projects, voters did not gravitate toward projects in the South Bay, specifically.
- ▶ Voters want the engineers and scientists to make the most prudent choices and spend funds on the most **necessary** projects.

“I wish there were some sort of priority list... If something needs to be done, I see why it’s important.”

“If this were something where it was more like parks in nature, I can see why you’d want it to be more local, but if you’re talking about quality of water and environment, it should be the whole bay”

Focus on the benefits

- ▶ Voters respond to the benefits, not the specifics of the restoration projects.
- ▶ Information about the number of acres and land use does little to sway them. Focus on benefits like:
 - ▶ **Cleanup of trash and toxics and water quality:** Voters like projects that will clean up the Bay and improve water quality.
 - ▶ **Safety and flood control:** doing whatever is needed to keep voters safe is important.
 - ▶ **Animal habitats:** voters care about wildlife and know they are an important indicator of the Bay ecosystem's health.
 - ▶ **Environment:** limiting the effects of climate change and environmental benefits are important.

“Take care of our levees, whatever, if they’re bad. I don’t want to flood... When it comes to acres and stuff, that’s too much.”

The devil is in the details

- ▶ The more they focus on the details, the less interested they become.
- ▶ Voters are confused by terms like “tidal marshes” and “salt ponds” but these specifics are not necessary to build support for Bay restoration. Painting with a broad brush is better.
- ▶ Details will need to be available for those who want them, but they will not be a key part of the approach to communicating with voters.

Potential Vulnerabilities

- ▶ With an electorate wrought by tax fatigue, a crowded ballot will be a challenge. Although initially voters are supportive of funding for Bay restoration, once they ponder other measures that may be on the ballot or other causes worthy of funding, they become more hesitant and more skeptical.
- ▶ There is danger in the perception that restoration is frivolous or unnecessary in this economy. Emphasize projects that are essential.

“How many other things on ballot are \$20?”

“We need to cleanup before we restore anything”

“On some ballots, there’s just so much info...you might see [this] and just skip it.”