

SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESTORATION AUTHORITY

Staff Recommendation  
June 24, 2022

**SAFER Bay Planning Project**

Project No. RA-035  
Project Manager: Laura Cholodenko

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,000,000 to the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority to conduct planning, perform data collection and analysis, develop design plans, and prepare program-level and project-level California Environmental Quality Act documentation for the Strategy to Advance Flood Protection, Ecosystems and Recreation along San Francisco Bay (SAFER Bay) Planning Project in San Mateo County.

**LOCATION:** Cities of East Palo Alto, Menlo Park, and Palo Alto, San Mateo County; Measure AA Region: West Bay

**MEASURE AA PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Safe, Clean Water and Pollution Prevention Program; Vital Fish, Bird and Wildlife Habitat Program; Integrated Flood Protection Program; Shoreline Public Access Program.

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Site Map and Project Designs](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Photographs of Existing Conditions](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS**

Staff recommends that the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority adopt the following resolution and findings:

Resolution:

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million dollars (\$1,000,000) to the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers

Authority to conduct planning, perform data collection and analysis, develop design plans, and prepare program-level and project-level California Environmental Quality Act documentation for the Strategy to Advance Flood Protection, Ecosystems and Recreation along San Francisco Bay (SAFER Bay) Planning Project in San Mateo County. Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Authority the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Authority funding.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority Act, Gov. Code Sections 66700-66706.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with The San Francisco Bay Clean Water, Pollution Prevention and Habitat Restoration Measure (Measure AA).

### **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends authorization to disburse up to \$1,000,000 to the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority (SFCJPA) to conduct planning, perform data collection and analysis, develop design plans, and prepare program-level and project-level California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) documentation for the Strategy to Advance Flood Protection, Ecosystems and Recreation along San Francisco Bay (SAFER Bay) Planning Project in San Mateo County. The SAFER Bay Planning Project will lead to coastal flood protection for communities in East Palo Alto and Menlo Park as well as restored tidal wetland habitat and improved recreational opportunities along seven miles of the San Francisco Bay shoreline in San Mateo County (Exhibit 1). Currently, areas within East Palo Alto and Menlo Park are exposed to coastal flooding from San Francisco Bay which is predicted to worsen with sea level rise. The project will design flood protection elements to current Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) coastal flood protection standards plus an additional 3.5 feet of tidal elevation to account for anticipated sea level rise. The project will integrate traditional flood protection with the restoration and enhancement of more than 550 acres of wetlands to create a more resilient and biologically diverse shoreline environment.

The plan area is divided into eight different reaches and will be implemented in phases. The proposed Phase 1 of the project includes actions within two reaches, one along the shoreline of East Palo Alto south of Bay Road and the other in former-salt production ponds R1 (450 acres) and R2 (150 acres) within the Ravenswood Pond Complex, part of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Exhibit 2, Figure 1). The Ravenswood Pond Complex

is also part of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project (SBSRP), a multiagency effort to restore over 15,000 acres of former salt evaporation ponds in South San Francisco Bay. ([www.southbayrestoration.org](http://www.southbayrestoration.org)). Restoration of Ponds R1 and R2 is included in the final SBSRP Environmental Impact Statement/Report (2007), a program-level evaluation of restoration alternatives that result in different amounts of tidal wetland and managed pond habitat at the end of the project's 50-year implementation period.

The SFCJPA is collaborating with the SBSRP to design and implement restoration of R1 and R2 into tidal marsh or a combination of tidal marsh and enhanced managed pond habitat as part of the SAFER Bay project. This collaboration will help the SBSRP meet its habitat restoration goals. Restoration of managed pond to tidal marsh would benefit species such as Ridgway's rail, salt marsh harvest mouse, and steelhead trout and enhancement of managed ponds would benefit western snowy plover and/or other shorebirds and ducks. The appropriate balance of habitat types to be restored and enhanced will be determined through CEQA evaluation and the adaptive management process of the SBSRP. Within Pond R2, the project is proposing to construct an engineered levee around an existing Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) substation within the southern part of the pond to protect the substation from flooding due to sea level rise. If that pond were to be tidally restored, the engineered levee would likely support a broad, shallow habitat transition slope (also known as an ecotone levee). The transition slope would provide high tide refugia habitat for tidal wetland wildlife that are expected to colonize the restored tidal marsh in Pond R2 and will add protection to the substation by buffering the new levee from high tides and waves that can cause erosion. The Phase 1 project also includes improvements to the levee next to Laumeister and Faber Tract Marshes in East Palo Alto (Exhibit 2, Figure 1) so that it provides more flood protection for the adjacent community and supports improved trail surfaces along the new levee top.

Program-level evaluation will be made of actions along the remaining reaches within Redwood City, Menlo Park, the Dumbarton Bridge approach, East Palo Alto shoreline north of Bay Road, and other ponds at Ravenswood (Exhibit 2, Figure 1). Flood protection elements that will be evaluated include new engineered levees to protect communities and infrastructure from current tidal flooding and projected sea level rise, floodwalls where existing spatial or other constraints do not allow for the construction of a levee, and habitat transition slopes along the waterside of some levees or floodwalls to enhance levee protection and create habitat. Construction of flood gates and pump stations may also be considered. Additional tidal marsh restoration and creation of transition slope habitat in the Ravenswood Pond Complex will also be evaluated, especially along the Dumbarton Bridge (Highway 84) touchdown in Pond SF2. Within these reaches the project will lead to enhanced public access and recreation by planning for the connection of existing non-contiguous trail segments and by creating new levee-top bicycle and pedestrian trails along the Bay shoreline, including upgrading sections of the Bay Trail (Exhibit 2). The overall project when implemented will benefit local residents by reducing flood risk and associated flood insurance requirements.

The proposed funding for the SAFER Bay Planning Project will support data collection and hydraulic and geotechnical analysis, development of engineered design plans, preparation of CEQA documentation at a program-level and project-level, and outreach with stakeholders, the public, and the locally affected communities. The program-level evaluation will facilitate outreach and community engagement by describing the vision and possible actions that could be

taken throughout the entire project area, while the project-level analysis will be for Phase 1 actions only. Environmental review of future project phases will tier from the program-level CEQA document that would be prepared with the proposed funding.

The San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority (SFCJPA) includes the cities of East Palo Alto, Palo Alto, and Menlo Park, the San Mateo County Flooding and Sea Level Rise Resiliency District, and Santa Clara Valley Water District. The SFCJPA planned and implemented the San Francisquito Creek Flood Protection and Ecosystem Restoration Project (Reach 1), a multi-jurisdictional fluvial flood risk reduction and ecosystem restoration project between Highway 101 and San Francisco Bay, along 1.5 miles of San Francisquito Creek in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. That project is directly adjacent to the southern boundary of the SAFER Bay project area and was completed in 2020. Reach 1 of the San Francisquito Creek project protects approximately 3,500 parcels from 100-year fluvial floods and three feet of sea level rise. The project also included development of more than 22 acres of new and improved marsh, five high tide refugia islands, installation of large woody debris and gravel refugia, and a small habitat transition slope in the Faber Marsh. There are an additional 2,700 parcels that are in the Bay floodplain, and 2,200 parcels that are in both fluvial and tidal floodplains, so flood risk remains for 4,900 parcels that will benefit from the SAFER Bay Project.

In addition to SFCJPA staff, the proposed planning project team includes local community-based organizations Nuestra Casa, Climate Resilient Communities, and Grassroots Ecology. Those organizations will lead development of a public outreach plan and organize four large outreach events and ten smaller events to engage stakeholders and community members in the planning process and solicit feedback on proposed actions. The project has broad support including support from governmental and non-governmental organizations, elected officials, and regulatory agencies (Exhibit 4).

The SAFER Bay Project faces similar risks to most multi-objective projects along the San Francisco Bay shoreline. These include delays caused by the environmental review process or discovery of new information requiring design changes. SFCJPA must also carefully consider the effects of levee breaches on adjacent infrastructure and land uses, such PG&E transmission lines and roadways.

**Site Description:** The SAFER Bay Project site is located immediately west of San Francisco Bay along approximately seven miles of the shoreline from the Menlo Park/Redwood City border south along East Palo Alto to San Francisquito Creek, which is the border between East Palo Alto (San Mateo County) and Palo Alto (Santa Clara County). The existing levees are un-engineered dirt berms that do not meet FEMA certification standards. Many sections of the Bay Trail in the project area are unpaved, less than 10 feet wide, and considered substandard from an accessibility perspective. The project connects to and is consistent with design criteria for the SFCJPA's completed San Francisquito Creek Flood Protection and Ecosystem Restoration Project. The proposed project is within the cities of Menlo Park and East Palo Alto on both public and privately owned property. The project includes actions that are within the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge, Refuge-managed land in Laumeister and Faber Tract Marshes (owned by the City of Palo Alto), and Ravenswood Open Space Preserve (owned by Midpeninsula Open Space District). Lands within the Refuge that would be restored during

Phase 1 are former salt production ponds that are currently managed to provide seasonally varying habitats for waterfowl in the winter and snowy plover and shorebirds in the summer.

The project also includes actions within land owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and the Cargill Corporation, as well as lands within the jurisdiction of the California Department of Transportation. Photographs of existing conditions within the project area are shown in Exhibit 3.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority</b>	<b>\$1,000,000</b>
Department of Water Resources (Local Levee Assistance Program)	\$1,045,624
<i>To Be Raised</i>	<i>\$3,980,000</i>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$6,025,624</b>

While the funding listed above will support the planning project, the SFCJPA has received \$17.8 million in private funding as match for pending grants that total about \$92 million in implementation funding.

**CONSISTENCY WITH AUTHORITY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION, THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY RESTORATION AUTHORITY ACT:**

Consistent with Government Code Section 66704.5, SFCJPA is a local agency working on shoreline parcels in the San Francisco Bay area, on a project that will 1) restore, protect, or enhance tidal wetlands, managed ponds, and natural habitats on the shoreline in the San Francisco Bay area; (2) build or enhance shoreline levees or other flood management features that are part of a project to restore, enhance, or protect tidal wetlands, managed ponds, or natural habitats; and (3) provide or improve public access or recreational amenities that are part of a project to restore, enhance, or protect tidal wetlands, managed ponds, or natural habitats.

Consistent with Section 66704.5(e) this award would be used to support planning and monitoring for an eligible project.

**CONSISTENCY WITH MEASURE AA PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES:**

This authorization is consistent with Measure AA’s *Safe, Clean Water and Pollution Prevention Program*, since the SAFER Bay Project will restore wetlands that provide natural filters and remove pollution from the Bay’s water.

This authorization is consistent with Measure AA’s *Vital Fish, Bird and Wildlife Habitat Program* since the SAFER Bay Project will restore tidal wetland and transition zone habitat that will support and increase vital populations of fish, birds, and other wildlife in and around the Bay, including the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

Consistent with Measure AA’s *Integrated Flood Protection Program*, the SAFER Bay Project will use natural habitats in combination with traditional shoreline protection measures wherever

possible to help protect communities and infrastructure along the Bay's shoreline from the risks of severe coastal flooding caused by storms and high-water levels.

Furthermore, this authorization is consistent with Measure AA's *Shoreline Public Access Program* since the SAFER Bay Project will enhance the quality of life of Bay Area residents by creating new trail access, improving the current condition of many sections of the Bay Trail, and making trails more resilient to sea level rise by raising their surface elevation.

**CONSISTENCY WITH MEASURE AA PRIORITIZATION CRITERIA:**

1. **Greatest positive impact.** The planning project will lead to the restoration of high-quality tidal marsh habitat, a natural community that has been severely reduced in acreage compared to its historic distribution throughout the San Francisco Estuary. The restoration of tidal marsh will provide habitat for numerous species of native wildlife, greatly increasing biological diversity within the project area and helping to recover several threatened and endangered species. Enhancement of managed ponds would benefit the federally threatened western snowy plover and other shorebirds and waterfowl by improving water circulation to increase prey availability and general water quality. The project would also provide a substantial flood protection benefit to thousands of parcels within the project area by upgrading levees and installing other flood protection features that will support habitat transition zones for added resilience and habitat benefit.
2. **Greatest long-term impact.** After future implementation, more than seven miles of shoreline will have enhanced flood risk management through construction of traditional flood protection (levees, floodwalls) combined with nature-based shoreline protection such as tidal marsh and habitat transition slopes. This integrated approach will enhance the built and natural environment within the project area and is expected to be resilient to the effects of climate change for the next 50 years.
3. **Leveraging resources and partnerships.** Project partners are a combination of government and private entities that are close to securing approximately \$92 million for implementation of the project. The project also leverages the long-term partnerships of the State Coastal Conservancy and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project which will enable the restoration of more than 550 acres of former salt ponds within the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge.
4. **Economically disadvantaged communities.** The San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority identifies East Palo Alto and the Belle Haven Community of Menlo Park as Economically Disadvantaged Communities. Nuestra Casa and Climate Resilient Communities are conducting ongoing outreach with these and other affected communities about the risks of climate change and opportunities for adaptation to those risks. The proposed project will build upon those ongoing efforts, giving residents an opportunity for meaningful participation in the project design process. Implementation of the SAFER Bay project will benefit local residents by reducing flood risk and associated flood insurance requirements. The project will also increase opportunities to access natural areas by building new trails and making improvements to existing trail sections. Greater access to natural areas will result in physical and mental health benefits for community members.

5. **Benefits to economy.** The future implementation of the project will lead to less disruption and displacement of residents in San Mateo County communities due to flood impacts. This will allow people to better maintain daily routines and reach workplaces in support of local and regional economies.
6. **Monitoring, maintenance, and stewardship.** The cities of Menlo Park and East Palo Alto have accepted responsibility for long-term maintenance of the SAFER Bay Project and the SFCJPA or the San Mateo County Flood and Sea Level Rise Resilience District (OneShoreline) will be involved for the long-term in support of adaptive management and monitoring. The SFCJPA is beginning its fourth year of monitoring and adaptive management for the completed Creek project described above and has built long term stewardship into its comprehensive planning process. Restored Ponds R1 and R2 will be managed and stewarded in the long-term as part of the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge, which has its own management and monitoring program for Refuge lands.
7. **Coastal Conservancy’s San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.** The SAFER Bay Planning Project is: (1) consistent with the Estuary Blueprint (SFEP 2022) Action 10 (protect, restore and enhance tidal marsh), Action 11 (restore estuarine-upland transition zones), Action 12 (maximize habitat benefits of managed ponds) and Action 24 (provide equitable public access compatible with wildlife), and the Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Update (SFEI 2015), which identifies opportunities to create a near continuous corridor of tidal marsh where the project is located (pp. 92); (2) multijurisdictional because it involves two cities in San Mateo County and serves a regional constituency (the restoration component will facilitate nationally and regionally significant wetland restoration efforts and will improve regional trail systems); (3) ready to move forward immediately because it completed feasibility studies between 2016–2019 and now has a team under contract that is ready to continue with planning and design; (4) providing opportunities for habitat, flood protection, and public access benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented, particularly within the context of future sea level rise, and (5) providing matching funds from other sources as described in the “Project Financing” section.
8. **San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission’s Coastal Management Program.** The SAFER Bay Planning Project meets the following priorities of the San Francisco Bay Plan:

Tidal Marshes and Mudflats Policy 5: Restore tidal action to tidal marshes and tidal flats that have been diked off from the Bay and/or manage historic wetlands to provide important Bay habitat for fish and other wildlife.

Water Quality Policy 1: Restore the Bay’s tidal marshes and conserve water surface area and volume to protect and improve water quality

Fish, Other Aquatic Organisms and Wildlife Policy 1: Conserve and restore the Bay’s tidal marshes, tidal flats, and subtidal habitat to assure benefits to fish and other aquatic organisms and wildlife for future generations.

Shoreline Protection Policy 5: Evaluate use of natural and nature-based features such as marsh vegetation and levees with transitional ecotone habitat.

Environmental Justice and Social Equity Policy 3: Conduct equitable and culturally-relevant community outreach.

9. **San Francisco Bay Joint Venture's Implementation Strategy.** This authorization is consistent with the SFBJV Implementation Strategy and meets many of its objectives. The SAFER Bay Project was conditionally accepted as a SFBJV project in May 2020. The SFCJPA will apply for SFBJV Design Review to maximize habitat value. The project will request full acceptance as an SFBJV project once design is complete.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

This project is exempt from CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, which exempts feasibility and planning studies. The work is also exempt pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306, which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the recommended authorization.