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Napa County parks, wildfire safety tax measure qualifies for ballot

Supporters of a proposed half-cent sales tax for open space and wildfire safety in Napa County have gathered enough signatures to qualify a ballot measure for the Nov. 3 election.

They needed to collect 5,011 signatures from registered county voters. Using a random sample of 500 signatures, the county Election Division declared that 6,188 of 7,113 signatures submitted were valid.

"Measure qualifies for election," the Election Division calculation sheet concluded.

The county's registrar of voters John Tuteur certified the results. Next, the measure will go to the Napa County Board of Supervisors to be placed on the ballot for consideration by voters in the county and its five cities.

"This is a very exciting step toward realizing durable funding for fire resilience, watershed conservation and open space protection in Napa County," said Melanie Parker, chief executive of the Land Trust of Napa County.

The measure could raise about $23 million annually. Of that, $11.5 million would go to the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District. Another $11.5 million would be overseen by the county Board of Supervisors for wildfire protection.

Spearheading the ballot initiative are the nonprofit Napa Land Trust and the nonprofit Napa Communities Firewise Foundation.

On the open space side, Parker said the sales tax would pay for more nature parks and trails and to protect watersheds that supply drinking water to cities.

"I would say the citizens of Napa have long wanted a fully funded parks and open space district," Parker said. "This will accomplish this."

On the fire protection side, money would pay to create and maintain firebreaks and other fuel reduction projects. Napa County Fire, Cal Fire and Napa Firewise have worked on such projects using grants and county money.

A sales tax would provide predictable funding, according to Napa Firewise CEO Joe Nordlinger. Otherwise, it's difficult to build a multi-year strategy depending on money that may or may not be there.

The open space and wildfire safety components of the proposed sales tax overlap, given that money would help with stewardship of protected lands, he said.

City dwellers have a stake in wildfire safety, according to Nordlinger. He pointed to Coffey Park, the Santa Rosa neighborhood that was torched by the October 2017 Tubbs Fire that ravaged Sonoma and northern Napa counties. He said such areas as Browns Valley in the city of Napa are vulnerable to wildfires.

One question is whether proposed sales tax can gain a majority vote at a time when people are expressing concern about inflation and high gasoline prices.

"We understand it's a challenging time economically and we take nothing for granted," Nordlinger said, adding that an ounce of wildfire prevention can avoid catastrophic costs later.

Two previous attempts to pass an open space tax and one bid to pass a fire prevention tax failed. Those measures originated with the Board of Supervisors and needed to garner at least two-thirds of the vote to succeed.

Because this latest attempt originates with citizen signatures, it can pass with a simple majority in support.

Among the past open space tax measures, Measure K in 2020 received 63% of the vote and Measure Z in 2016 received 65%. Both fell short of the two-thirds hurdle, or 66.66%, that they needed to win.

Similarly, the Measure L fire prevention tax in 2022 garnered 58% of the vote and failed. The bar will be lower with the latest measure needing only a majority vote to pass.

Above: A prescribed burn took place in the Pacific Union College Forest in Angwin in May 2025. This is one of many vegetation control measures underway in Napa County to try to prevent catastrophic wildfire damage.