

## Special district could restore area wetlands

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### OUR OPINION

BEFORE massive development came to California in the wake of the 1849 gold rush, San Francisco, San Pablo and Suisun bays were far different from what we see today.

From the 1850s to the 1960s, San Francisco Bay was filled in at a rate of two square miles a year. As a result, more than one-third of the Bay and more than 90 percent of its wetlands were lost to farms, homes and industry.

That was a staggering blow to California's largest bay and estuary system and a great loss to the environment, much of it permanent.

Fortunately, a growing ecological awareness in the past few decades has halted further destruction of the land around the bays. But preventing further taking of wetlands is hardly a complete environmental policy. Restoration of as many wetlands as feasible needs to be the goal.

That is the vision of Save The Bay, a conservation group that is leading the effort to restore native wetlands. It would make true the dream of local environmentalists, who want to return unused land to its natural state.

Save The Bay's plan is to return to wetlands the 36,176 acres of land around the Bay that already have been bought for restoration.

The land includes

13,000 acres of South Bay salt ponds, 1,400 acres along Bair Island near Redwood City and the Hamilton Army airfield in Marin County.

To date, \$370 million in state, federal and local funds have been spent to buy the land. But it will cost a lot more to restore all of the purchased land to wetlands.

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Surveys have shown that the residents of the Bay Area strongly support wetlands restoration and are willing to pay for it. A 2006 poll done for Save The Bay found 83 percent of residents polled said they would be willing to pay \$10 per year in taxes or fees to restore the Bay's wetlands.

David Lewis, executive director of Save The Bay, said that if costs were spread out over 50 years and everyone in the Bay Area paid a share, it would be less than \$4 per year per person.

Lewis suggests the creation of a special regional taxing district that includes the nine Bay Area counties. It would raise funds and manage the projects much as the East Bay Regional Parks District operates.

Forming a special district to restore the shoreline of the Bay Area is an idea that deserves serious consideration. It could raise significant revenues, which could be matched by state and federal grants.

When local residents work together on a large scale to raise local funds, they have a better chance of attracting assistance from federal and state sources and from private foundations.

There are a number of wetlands restorations under way, paid for by state bonds and other sources. But Save The Bay's effort to restore wetlands is the largest in the region and one of the most ambitious in the nation.

Save The Bay should put together a ballot initiative to create a wetlands restoration district for residents of the

nine-county Bay Area to vote on.

We trust it would receive widespread support and make it possible for a much-improved Bay Area environment.

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