

## Parks May Get Financial Boost

A \$4 billion measure on the June ballot would help upgrade parks and increase access to them.

By Alastair Bland | *Published: February 12, 2018*



**The \$4 billion bond measure would provide funding for Crown Memorial State Beach in Alameda and other local parks.**

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More than 15 years have passed since California's parks received a big shot of state bond money, and advocates say park infrastructure is falling apart.

Trails are wearing away. So are roads. Picnic tables are broken. Historic buildings are decaying. Bathrooms are filthy. Repairs and upgrades will cost billions. Drought, wildfires, and floods have made these problems worse, and changing climate and rising sea level are expected to exacerbate impacts in the future. In addition, low-income communities have limited access to parks, especially in the Bay Area.

A general obligation bond measure would reverse the decline of California's state and regional park system and create new recreation opportunities for millions of people, according to park advocates fervently trying to rally support for the measure.

By the most optimistic of opinions, Senate Bill 5 would help make California great again.

It heads to the ballot in June, and if voters approve it, "The California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018" would direct just over \$4 billion toward deferred maintenance of park amenities, habitat restoration programs, protection of waterways, safeguards against wildfire and sea-level rise, and the acquisition of new lands for public use.

“It is severely needed,” said Mary Creasman, a San Leandro resident and the California director of government affairs for the conservation group The Trust for Public Land. “We haven’t had statewide investment in parks since 2002, and many communities are starved for these kinds of investments.”

Robert Doyle, general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District, helped draft the bill, which Gov. Jerry Brown signed on Oct. 15 and would need a two-thirds vote to pass. Doyle feels his district deserves some statewide support for its role in managing three local state parks, Crown Memorial State Beach in Alameda, McLaughlin Eastshore State Park in Berkeley, and Lake Del Valle State Recreation Area near Livermore.

“None of them gets any funding from the state, and that means every year, your East Bay taxpayer money is being spent on these state parks,” he said.

The bond measure would ease this fiscal pressure, while addressing many other areas of need. The measure would allocate \$2.83 billion to parks and natural resources, including \$725 million for creating new parks in communities lacking in access to open public space.

Another \$1.27 billion would be earmarked for water resources, including \$162 million for urban stream restoration and hundreds of millions of dollars for flood protection, groundwater sustainability, and drought preparedness.

Salmon and steelhead habitat would receive restoration funds, and the state’s Department of Forestry and Fire Protection would get \$50 million—an aspect of the bond measure that Doyle said is especially pertinent to the East Bay. “We’re very concerned about fire, and there’s no better example than 2017 of what the risks of wildfire are in urban areas,” he said. “The Oakland hills are loaded with highly flammable fuels.”

Sam Hodder, president and CEO of Save the Redwoods League, said the bond measure would also benefit some of California’s redwood forests. Hodder, an Orinda resident, said second-growth redwood forests that were logged in the 19th and 20th centuries may now be growing back at unnaturally high tree densities. The bond measure would provide funding toward management of these forests, including the thinning of trees to allow for healthy recovery. This, he said, indirectly benefits water quality, stream flows, and native salmon and steelhead.

“This measure is really about protecting what’s great about California.”

The bill also addresses social inequities in park placement, infrastructure, and access. It even includes anti-displacement strategies, like tenants’ rights, affordable housing support, and rent control measures, aimed at preventing the gentrification of areas that become newly improved with recreational and environmental enhancements. Creasman noted that more than one in five residents of Richmond do not have a public park within a half mile—a deficiency the measure could address by acquiring new spaces and opening them to public use.

Creasman said the bill also promises that refurbishment and construction jobs will be contracted to locally owned companies, with a focus on firms owned by women and minorities. “This is very progressive,” Creasman said. “We haven’t seen a natural resources bond before in California with such a strong focus on social equity and community access.”

Many Californians living within an hour or two of the coast have never been to the beach, she said. The measure, by funding public transportation—including shuttles—and new coastal parking lots and trail infrastructure, will invite more people to the coast. Furthermore, she said, the bill would offer \$60 million to create low-cost accommodations on the coast, including campgrounds and cabins.

“Experiencing our coast isn’t just about folks with money or privately held coastal property,” she said.

While Creasman and many supporters feel the bill provides a buffet of social benefits for recreation-deprived Californians, others think it will be one more heavy burden on taxpayers. The Contra Costa Taxpayers Association, based in Walnut Creek, is opposed to the bond measure. On its website, the organization states it is “dedicated to promoting accountable, cost-effective and efficient government and opposing unnecessary taxes and spending.” In an interview, the nonprofit’s president Jack Weir said Senate Bill 5 is an unnecessary extra burden on the state’s taxpayers.

“There’s a point at which taxpayers are completely overburdened, and we think we’re at that point,” he said.

Weir believes the state has more pressing matters to resolve with taxpayer support than parks, open space, wetlands, and other areas addressed by Senate Bill 5.

“If you look at our transportation infrastructure—our roads, our bridges, our freeways—they’re in terrible condition because of the lack of adequate maintenance,” he said. “We’d rather see money spent to bring our basic infrastructure up to a decent condition, including dams and things of that sort, than on, say, acquiring new lands for parks.”

But Doyle said research has shown that every dollar invested into regional parks produces \$4 in economic benefits for the state, in part through more business activity and improved health.

Creasman said the notion that voters can choose to support general infrastructure or recreational opportunities is “a false choice” that fails to perceive various health, economic, and social benefits of parks and open space.

Basic social infrastructure is important. “But we also need quality of life,” she said.

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