

Prop. O would aid cleanup of river, Santa Monica Bay

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Sunday, October 17, 2004 - Faced with 67 new clean-water regulations over the next decade, Los Angeles officials are asking voters to approve a property tax hike to cover a \$500 million bond needed to pay to reduce trash, animal waste and other pollutants in the Los Angeles River and Santa Monica Bay.

Officials say they need additional revenue from Proposition O to help pay the multibillion-dollar cost of implementing wastewater-pollution safeguards required by the federal Clean Water Act.

Current storm-water fees generate \$28 million annually, while implementing only the first five limits will cost an estimated \$541 million. Implementing the other regulations likely will mean other tax hikes in the future.

If approved by two-thirds of the ballots cast on Nov. 2, Proposition O would raise taxes on all residential, commercial and industrial property. It would cost an average of \$34 annually for 24 years for the owner of a home valued at \$350,000.

"Let's do it now when it's cheaper, when we can show leadership and reduce lawsuits that we would have to pay for if we don't do it," said Councilman Eric Garcetti.

That argument convinced the Valley Industry and Commerce Association and other business groups to join environmentalists in supporting Proposition O.

No formal opposition position has been filed, although some homeowners groups complain the bond unfairly saddles property owners with the bulk of the clean water bill, even though commercial and industrial users generate the most trash.

"Our dispute is not with the goal of the measure, but how it's being financed," said Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Association. "They are focusing on one segment of the population -- homeowners and property owners -- and making them bear 100 percent of the cost."

Bond supporters argue that dirty waterways are not only a residential or industrial problem, but a symptom of a city crisscrossed with 7,300 miles of paved streets, littered with trash, stained with motor oil and fouled with pet waste, fertilizers and toxic chemicals.

Rain and irrigation wash the muck into concrete draining channels that carry it into the ocean.

The solution is a series of projects that capture and clean urban runoff, and even possibly reuse it.

Bond revenue would be used to buy hundreds of screens to keep trash out of storm drains; to install equipment to divert bacteria-laden storm water to the sewer system; and to help fund park projects and green space in order to collect urban runoff before it reaches storm drains.

The measure also requires the appointment of a citizen oversight committee and regular audits by the city controller to ensure that projects will deliver clean water on time and on budget.

"If we're smart and spend the money the way it should be spent, you're not just looking at cleaning water in a concrete channel; you're looking at funding parks and open space," said Melanie Winter,

director of The River Project, a Studio-City based environmental group. "Dirt, soil and plants help clean up water."

However, the \$500 million generated by the bond would probably help only with the first pollution limits on trash and bacteria.

Upcoming regulations will cost even more. For example, rules to remove zinc, nickel and other metals in the Los Angeles River will cost an estimated \$1.4 billion.

The price tag for implementing all 67 regulations ranges from \$35 billion to \$350 billion.

That troubles some observers who suggest the city will have to ask voters for money again and again.

Bond supporters, however, say provisions of the federal Clean Water Act and court-ordered deadlines require the city to clean up storm waters immediately.

"It's not a question of whether you do these projects," said Councilman Jack Weiss. "They have to be done, and we have to have the money to do it."

The Clean Water Act requires regulators to determine how much pollution a waterway can handle before it becomes unsafe to use. The U.S. complied with that regulation in Los Angeles and Ventura counties only after environmental groups filed suit in the 1990s.

A 1999 settlement set a 13-year schedule to adopt more than 90 limits on bacteria, metals, salts and other pollutants in waterways. Some 67 of those limits applied to Los Angeles City waterways, and the first rule was adopted in 2002 -- cutting trash in the Los Angeles River.

The city initially sued the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, arguing the trash rule was unreasonable, but dropped the suit less than a year later.

Other cities are still fighting the new pollution limits in court, arguing the cost of regulations will be exorbitant.

Los Angeles and Orange counties face similar pollution limits and are watching how well voters respond to the city's bond.

Los Angeles County is now developing a list of projects and cost estimates, and staff has looked at a bond, a storm-water utility district, a benefit assessment district, even sales tax increase to cover the costs.

In the meantime, the county has dramatically cut street maintenance and storm drain construction to pay for water quality improvements.

"We're rapidly approaching the wall on the easy solutions," said Don Wolfe, interim director of Public Works. "Anything we do, we really have to sell to the politicians and the public."