

Bond to Clean L.A. Waterways Advances

Council is expected to put \$500-million plan on the ballot. Lakes, rivers would benefit.

Los Angeles Times July 8, 2004 by Jessica Garrison

Los Angeles City Council members took the first step Wednesday toward asking voters to approve a \$500-million bond in November to clean up the water in municipal rivers and lakes, and keep pollution from flowing into Santa Monica Bay.

Council members, applauded by environmentalists, said the bond was the only way for the city to comply with the federal Clean Water Act and make sure Los Angeles beaches would be safe for swimming and surfing in the years to come.

"We've got trash in our river, bacteria on our beaches and animal waste in our lakes," said Councilman Eric Garcetti, who spearheaded the proposal. "And all of this flows through our communities."

The bond proposal comes on top of another proposed tax increase that may also be on the November ballot to raise the county's sales tax by a half-cent to pay for more police officers and sheriff's deputies.

The water bond would cost owners of a median-priced home worth \$350,000 about \$56 a year for 20 years.

David Beckman, a senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, called the council's enthusiasm for a water bond "a fantastic change in attitude."

For years, Los Angeles officials waged bitter court battles against the clean water standards. But after limited success on that front, officials in recent years have decided to try to comply with the act.

Council members unanimously voted to order the city attorney to draft a ballot measure and will take a final vote later this month on whether to place the bond before voters.

They also called for the creation of a citizens advisory committee that would make sure the money was properly spent.

The bond revenue would pay for the first five years of projects to help the city comply with clean water regulations.

The projects include adding parks to naturally filter storm water, installing screens to catch trash flowing into the Los Angeles River and other waterways, and building dozens of new water treatment systems to remove bacteria and sediment.

But even if two-thirds of the voters approve the bond, city officials estimate that they will need an additional \$435 million over 13 years to fully comply with a federal consent decree designed to reduce pollutants in water.

Los Angeles faces more than 60 different mandates to reduce particular pollutants.

By September 2006, for example, the city is supposed to reduce trash in the Los Angeles River by 20%, and to eliminate it by 2015.

The cost to meet that mandate alone is estimated at \$120 million.

Some taxpayer advocates were skeptical.

Kris Vosburgh, executive director of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Assn., questioned why Los Angeles needed a bond to pay for improvements when it was handing out raises for employees. But Vosburgh said his group had not taken a position on the proposal.

And even with a potential police bond on the ballot, polls conducted last year suggest that voters overwhelmingly support taxing themselves to pay for cleaner water, city officials said.

But some environmentalists caution that the task of cleaning the city's water is so huge that even if officials win a \$500-million bond, officials must keep a "laser-like focus" on clean water to achieve it.

Another mandate, for example, requires the city to reduce bacteria levels in Santa Monica Bay by 2021, at an estimated cost of \$750 million over the next 18 years, far more than the bond will raise.

At the same time, city officials are often tempted to tap bond money for pet projects, such as planting trees and building pocket parks.

"The bond needs to clearly state that achieving clean water is the fundamental criteria for project funding," Beckman said.

Several council members hastened to agree.

"This is not pork projects," said Councilman Jack Weiss. "This is not pet projects. This has to be done with one simple, pure vision, which is the vision of clean water."

Also on Wednesday, Mayor James K. Hahn announced the formation of a Green Ribbon Commission on Renewable Energy, which will help the city's Department of Water and Power meet the goal of getting 20% of its power from renewable energy by 2017.

Hahn said that would make the city's air cleaner, reduce emissions and encourage energy efficiency.

Commission member Matt Peterson, from the group Global Green, said emphasizing renewable energy could also boost economic development, leading to "clean jobs in Los Angeles not dirty jobs in Utah."

Possible projects

The Los Angeles City Council voted Wednesday to draft a \$500-million bond issue to pay for water projects. Here's how the money may be spent:

- \$90 million to \$100 million for screens, covers and deflective devices to control trash and sediment in the Los Angeles River, and for wetlands and other environmental restoration projects along the river.

- \$75 million to \$80 million for beach protection, including cisterns, wetlands restoration and a treatment facility to manage runoff into Santa Monica Bay.
- \$75 million to \$80 million for treatment facilities to catch trash, bacteria and other contaminants in the Los Angeles River.
- \$60 million to \$70 million to improve water quality in Echo Park Lake, Lincoln Park Lake, Lake Machado and Reseda Lake.
- \$60 million to \$70 million for projects to control bacteria and metals in runoff from parking lots, power line easements and other locations.
- \$40 million to \$50 million to build diversion structures to control bacteria runoff at Ballona Creek and the Los Angeles River.
- \$35 million to \$50 million for cisterns around the city to recycle storm water and remove pollutants.

Source: Los Angeles City Council's chief legislative analyst