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June 20, 2012

Marin County Parks Commission
c/o Marin County Parks Department
3501 Civic Center Drive
San Rafael, CA 94903

Subject: *Parks, Open Space, and Agricultural Preservation Easement Tax Ballot Measure: Recommendations for Expenditure Plan*

Dear Commission Members:

Marin Conservation League is pleased to respond to the invitation of the Marin County Parks Commission for input to an expenditure plan for the proposed ballot measure. To facilitate responses, Marin County Parks Department furnished a "Public Comments Form" with a number of categories for possible allocations. Using this form as a guide, MCL's Parks and Open Space Committee and Board of Directors have discussed the various categories and wish to make the following recommendations to the Commission.

Proposed Ballot Measure. The proposed measure is for a 1/8 or 1/4 cent sales tax measure to be placed on the November 2012 ballot. If successful, the measure would raise approximately \$5 million or \$10 million annually for a period of ten years. MCL agrees that annual revenues from the measure would be allocated as previously outlined: 20 percent to the MALT agricultural easement program; 10 percent to local community or district parks; and 70 percent to Marin County Parks Department to be used for stewardship, maintenance, parks, and land acquisition.

Marin Conservation League strongly supports the 1/4 cent tax, if the results of the recent survey indicate sufficient voter support. The survey results will be heard by the Board of Supervisors on June 26.

Recommended allocations for an Expenditure Plan. Although MCL supports a 1/4 cent tax measure and makes the following recommendations based on that assumption, we also recognize that funding priorities might shift with lesser revenues from a 1/8 cent tax. Therefore, we offer alternative allocations in the latter case. We also assume that the recommendations are for average allocations over the ten-year life of the tax, and could vary from year to year. Further, these recommendations are for the use of revenues from the tax measure only, and are not intended to suggest how existing Department budgets should be allocated.

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The Public Comments Form offers categories as guidance for making allocations. It was our preference to lump several categories under broader headings to obtain “ballpark” percentages. This should be clear in the following headings.

1. Maintain and protect existing natural resources and facilities (“Stewardship”) – Categories 1, 2, and 4. – 50 percent.

We combined three categories under the general heading of protection of natural resources, and maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities, to include decommissioning and restoration of inappropriate trails. The MCL Board agreed unanimously that the County needs “*to take care of what we already have*” and therefore should give this broad category high priority. Included under this heading would be programs such as habitat restoration, control of invasive species, fuel management, repair of system trails and/or removal of inappropriate trails (with restoration of habitat), as well as repair and maintenance of structural improvements and infrastructure.

As an alternative, assuming revenue from a 1/8 cent tax, we would raise this allocation to 60 percent in order to protect the County’s existing investments with limited funds.

2. Natural lands acquisition – Category 6 – 30 percent.

Some 15,000 acres of valuable natural resource lands, including baylands, remain unprotected in the county. Once developed, they will be gone forever. The tax measure alone would not produce sufficient funds for major acquisitions. MCL Board recognizes, however, that to tap outside sources of funds for land acquisition, the County must have sufficient funds on hand to show support and leverage grants or other funding sources. Also, a predictable future revenue stream would enable the County to sell bonds to acquire lands when they became available. In either case, the County needs funds to enable flexibility and the ability to react quickly to acquire lands when they are available. Acquiring priority natural resource lands could mean “banking” the land and deferring improvements for access to a later time.

Category 6. in the Public Comment Form also includes acquisition of “. . .access in preserves.” The meaning here is not clear. However, if one uses examples such as acquisition of lands to improve access to existing preserves, such as the “Joplin” property in Baltimore Canyon, or the “Morrison” property in Forest Knolls, than we concur that such acquisition is appropriate under this category and important as a means of connecting communities to the preserves.

Alternatively, assuming revenue from a 1/8 cent tax, we would reduce this allocation to 20 percent, in view of the stewardship priorities in 1., above.

3. Ranger Staff and Visitor Services – Category 8 – 20 percent.

This category emphasizes the need for sufficient staff to continue effective education and volunteer programs, other visitor-support services, and enforcement. The MCL Board believes that the condition of open space preserves and other parklands as well as visitor experience benefit greatly from the presence of and positive interactions between ranger staff and visitors, the opportunity for education, and more consistent enforcement of regulations. We believe that the cost of adequate personnel can be more than offset by the prevention of costly damage repair and the potential cost of unsafe behaviors.

As an alternative, under a 1/8 cent measure, we would allocate 15 percent, leaving 5 percent for contingencies, below.

4. Contingencies

The MCL Parks and Open Space Committee added this category, and the Board concurred, to allow for contingencies and needed flexibility under an 1/8 cent measure.

5. Capital improvements and new lands for active recreation – Categories 3., 5. and 7. – 0 percent

MCL has combined these three categories under the heading of new capital improvements (including new trails and facilities in parks), and acquisition of new lands for active recreation (e.g., ballfields, etc.). In an era of limited resources, MCL believes that the Parks Department should not make new capital investments in active recreation *except as possible under existing budgets*. Much can be gained from maintenance and repair of existing park facilities and trails in the preserves. Furthermore, because the density of system and non-system trails in the preserves already exceeds that of comparable open space districts in the Bay Area, and the ratio of rangers-to-trails is well below other districts, no new trails should be constructed, even short connectors, unless equivalent segments of system trails are decommissioned.

We hope these recommendations will be useful to the Commission in developing an Expenditure Plan, and we look forward to working with you to pass a successful ballot measure.

Sincerely,



Susan Stompe
President



Nona Dennis
Chair, Parks and Open Space Committee

cc: Marin County Board of Supervisors