

Supervisors may put open space sales tax on ballot



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County residents could decide whether to increase the sales tax a quarter-cent to raise \$8 million annually for open space preservation and watershed and habitat protection.

County supervisors on Tuesday showed interest in placing a quarter-cent sale tax measure on the November 2016 ballot. They listened to a request from the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District.

“I fully support them,” Supervisor Keith Caldwell said. “I think they have proven themselves. I think it’s our duty to allow them to move forward.”

Supervisors unanimously directed staff to work with the district on ballot language that will come back to them for further discussion.

In November 2006, voters approved establishing the Napa County Regional and Open Space District. The district owns about 4,000 acres of open space, operates Moore Creek Park, Bothe-Napa Valley State Park and other parks and manages the Oat Hill Mine Trail, among other endeavors. The backbone of its

budget is \$800,000 annually from the county's hotel tax, supplemented by grants and program fees.

"The district is now approaching the limits of what more it can accomplish with its existing level of funding," a district report said.

Nobody at Tuesday's session had anything bad to say about the district. But Jack Gray of the Napa County Taxpayers Association said local voters could be faced next year with as many as six tax measures, and that more taxes would be hard to pay for people who are retired and on fixed incomes.

"This one will be opposed by the Napa County Taxpayers Association, simply because we are being overwhelmed by the taxes," Gray said.

One possible tax measure is a bond for a new jail that the county could place on the June 2016 ballot. The Napa Valley Unified School District and Napa Valley College are among the other agencies considering bond measures.

Supervisor Brad Wagenknecht also noted the array of possible tax measures.

"What do you say to that?" Wagenknecht asked Regional Park and Open Space District General Manager John Woodbury.

"My answer to this is it's a matter of voters deciding what their priorities are," Woodbury said.

Supervisor Mark Luce said an open space tax would be one of his own priorities. He said he'd like to at least give citizens a chance to decide if they'd support a tax.

Luce also liked the idea of the proposed revenue source being a sales tax, adding that visitors who enjoy local parks and open space would also be paying it.

Caldwell said the district has done well with what is basically a shoe-string budget and has been a good steward of that money. Imagine what the district could have accomplished with more money, he said.

"I certainly think it is the democratic process — you give voters information, they make decisions," Caldwell said.

A quarter-cent sales tax increase would have to be approved by at least two-thirds of voters to become law. Napa County has a sales tax rate of 8 cents on the dollar.

The proposed sales tax could expire in nine years after bringing in \$72 million.