

## Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority 2026 Expenditure Plan – DRAFT

### **SUMMARY**

Since its creation in 1993, the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority (Authority) has helped protect over 30,000 acres of open space, agricultural lands and natural areas, preserving the natural beauty and health of the Santa Clara Valley and enhancing our region’s water resources, air quality, wildlife habitat and scenic views to equitably benefit current and future residents. Created by the California Legislature through the foresight of concerned citizens and governed by a publicly elected board of directors, the Authority has efficiently and effectively implemented its critical mission. For every dollar of local taxpayer funding collected, the Authority has significantly leveraged matching funds from state, federal and private sources to implement its projects and continues to receive excellent annual audits and transparency reviews. To date, the Authority has brought in more than \$180M of outside funding to leverage local tax dollars. Today, the Authority is a recognized leader and innovator in public land conservation, stewardship and nature-based solutions to climate change, and equitable access to nature’s benefits.

### **WHY THIS MEASURE IS VITAL TO OUR FUTURE**

As weather patterns have become more extreme, the threat of sprawling development has grown, and the public demand for open space, parks and trails has increased, so too has the need grown for effective protection and management of our natural and working lands. In the past 10 years alone, the amount of public open space that the Authority is responsible for managing and stewarding has doubled, while its revenues to support this vital mission have remained essentially flat. This means the benefits these healthy natural and working lands provide to our communities have increased significantly – yet more support is required to maintain the health of natural lands in the Santa Clara Valley and the life-supporting benefits they provide to our communities and economy.

Globally and locally, there is a growing gap in funding needed to protect and restore nature. The funding that has supported our significant conservation gains to-date is no longer sufficient to sustain the health of our natural lands and waters and to build resilience to more frequent and extreme weather events, biodiversity losses and development threats.

We know that protecting and restoring nature is a smart investment. Use of precious public funds for protecting and stewarding nature now is a more pro-active and efficient use of funding than paying for recovery after each disaster. With the meaningful investment that would be provided by the ballot measure contemplated under this expenditure plan (Expenditure Plan) , the Authority can expand the essential work on the public’s behalf to protect, steward and manage natural and working lands to benefit nature and all residents of the Santa Clara Valley.

If enacted by voters, the *Insert Name of the Measure* (Measure) would provide critical funding to the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority to protect, restore, maintain and manage a growing network of protected open space, wildlife habitat, water resources and agricultural lands in the Santa Clara Valley that is essential to sustain the health of our communities and natural environment.

This Expenditure Plan is informed by the Authority's *Santa Clara Valley Greenprint*, a 30-year conservation priorities plan adopted by the Board of Directors in 2014, that created a shared vision for the future of the region's open space, agricultural lands, natural resources lands. If the Measure is approved, the proceeds from the resultant parcel tax would be allocated to fund open space, natural resource, agricultural, educational and climate resilience projects such as those described below.

This Expenditure Plan (Plan) outlines the specific types of projects that are eligible to be funded by the Measure through six interrelated programs that implement the Authority's mission:

1. Protect Natural and Working Lands
2. Restore, Steward and Maintain Open Space Lands, Water Resources and Natural Resources
3. Expand Public Access to Parks and Open Space
4. Expand Nature-based Investment in Urban Areas
5. Engage and Educate the Community
6. Protect Agricultural Land and Support Healthy Soils

In all instances, any project implemented with Measure funds shall be consistent with the Authority's powers as set forth in Public Resources Code section 35100 et seq.

### **Program Descriptions**

#### **1. Protect Natural and Working Lands: *Preserving Our Treasured Landscapes***

- a. Protect scenic viewsheds and greenbelts between cities by acquiring land and conservation easements on properties closest to urban areas around Silicon Valley to balance growth and to discourage sprawl, encourage infill development, and provide resilience for communities to a changing climate, including natural flood protection, wildlife connectivity, healthy local food systems, public recreation and cultural and Tribal resource protections.
- b. Expand protection for the natural areas and agricultural lands of the Coyote Valley to further secure and maintain a permanent greenbelt of conserved lands between the cities of San José and Morgan Hill.
- c. Protect multi-benefit landscapes along the Pajaro River and in the Upper Pajaro River watershed on the Santa Clara County / San Benito County border to provide flood protection, wildlife connectivity, local food sources, and public recreational trails, and to protect important cultural and Tribal resources.
- d. Coordinate with partner agencies and organizations to establish a connected network of parks and protected open spaces that preserve biodiversity, restore critical habitats and provide resilience to a changing climate.
- e. Protect critical movement pathways that provide safe passage for wildlife and prevent inbreeding and population decline of threatened species and support wildlife diversity (e.g. Coyote Valley, Pajaro River, Santa Cruz Mountains to Diablo Range, Santa Cruz Mountains to Gabilan Range).
- f. Protect important habitat for rare, threatened, and endangered species and ecosystems including serpentine grasslands and wetlands and sustain healthy populations of wildlife in the Santa Cruz Mountains and Diablo Range.

- g. Purchase strategic properties to create new open space preserves and expand existing open space preserves and to accommodate new amenities for public access (e.g. El Toro Trail and Parking area in Morgan Hill, Santa Teresa Foothills in San José, and Milpitas foothills and East San Jose foothills).
- h. Purchase significant trail corridors to improve regional trail connectivity such as the Bay Area Ridge Trail and Bay Trail in coordination with Santa Clara County Parks, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, and City Parks and Recreation Departments.
- i. Protect and retain prime productive farmland for growing healthy, local food and maintaining co-benefits of critical environmental benefits including groundwater recharge, food security, biodiversity, managing growth and climate resilience.

## **2. Restore, Steward and Maintain Open Space Lands, Water Resources and Natural Resources:**

*Provide Safe Clean Water, Flood Management and Diverse Ecosystems*

### **a. Healthy Lands and Waterways**

- 1. Restore and steward oak woodlands and riparian vegetation along creeks and streams to benefit water quality, native fish and amphibian populations and wildlife movement between the Diablo and Santa Cruz Mountain Ranges.
- 2. Restore and steward natural floodplains in the Pajaro River to support habitat and reduce downstream flooding for farming communities.
- 3. Reconnect Fisher Creek in Coyote Valley to its historic floodplain to restore habitat, improve groundwater recharge, improve water quality, and reduce downstream flooding.
- 4. Restore and steward natural floodplains and wetlands to benefit migratory birds, rare amphibians, and to reduce downstream flood risk.
- 5. Maintain trails, staging areas, and public lands and access facilities to enhance visitor experience and maintain clean, safe, environmentally-sustainable open space preserves.

### **b. Manage Wildfire Risk on Authority Lands**

- 1. Reduce catastrophic wildfire risk to local communities by managing forests, grasslands and woodlands in partnership with CalFire, Santa Clara County, Fire Safe Councils and other firefighting agencies.
- 2. Manage vegetation and increase fire resilience by developing and maintaining shaded fuel breaks, reducing hazardous fuel loads and controlling invasive species.
- 3. Deploy fire response technologies that improve early response and fire suppression.

### **c. Habitat Restoration and Wildlife Corridors**

- 1. Enhance, restore and maintain habitat for migratory birds, butterflies (and other pollinators) and native plant species.
- 2. Enhance, restore and maintain wildlife corridors to safe passage and support healthy populations of wildlife moving between 1,100,000 acres of habitat in the Santa Cruz Mountains and Diablo Range and to reduce wildlife / vehicle collisions.
- 3. Maintain and improve habitat quality, water quality and watershed health to benefit anadromous fish and amphibians

4. Plant, restore and steward native forests and woodlands, enhance healthy soils, and restore and maintain wetlands to sequester carbon.

**d. Partnerships with Native American Tribes**

1. Facilitate Tribal access to conserved lands to foster Traditional Ecological Knowledge and enhance land stewardship practices.
2. Partner with local Tribes to create a native plant nursery to cultivate culturally significant plants and support habitat restoration.
3. Work with local tribes to implement cultural burns to reduce destructive wildfires and restore ecosystem health.

**e. Land Stewardship and Caring for Open Space**

1. Expand partnerships with local cattle ranchers to promote healthy grassland habitat and biodiversity through conservation grazing.
2. Study and monitor wildlife movement in key areas to advance effective land protection and habitat restoration efforts.
3. Manage and control invasive, non-native plant species to protect and enhance rare habitats.
4. Manage farmland and rangeland with practices that support healthy soils and sequester carbon.

**f. Science-based Research and Partnerships**

1. Support significant scientific studies with universities, community colleges and other partners to inform and enhance management of land and natural resources in support of the Authority's Mission.

**3. Expand Public Access to Parks and Open Space: *Promoting equitable access to nature***

**a. Provide a variety of outdoor facilities and access points to connect people to nature and agriculture** in Santa Clara Valley in meaningful, culturally appropriate and innovative ways.

1. Open and expand recreational and educational facilities that engage people with natural, historic, agricultural and cultural landscapes.
2. Plan for new and expanded accessible trails and amenities at open space preserves to promote community health and wellness for people with varying abilities and needs.
3. Construct new trails and close gaps in regional hiking and bicycle trails, including the Bay Area Ridge Trail, San Francisco Bay Trail, Coyote Creek Trail, Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, Guadalupe River Trail and others included in Santa Clara County's Countywide Trails Plan and Cities Park and Recreation Plans.

#### **4. Expand Nature-based Investment in Urban Areas: *Connecting people to nature in their neighborhoods***

**a. Fund projects that provide greater equitable access to nature** in urban areas in Milpitas, Santa Clara, San José, Campbell, Morgan Hill and urban County areas.

**b. Enhance and expand the Authority's Urban Grant Program\* by advancing projects that create healthy and safe open space and park areas in local communities**

**c. Invest in climate-resilient communities through partnership projects**

\* Urban Grants Program: The purpose of the Authority's existing Urban Grants Program is to assist municipalities, schools, and non-profit organizations with applicable projects within the cities of Milpitas, Santa Clara, San Jose, Campbell, Morgan Hill, and urban County areas to create healthy and safe open space, greenspace, park areas in communities and to enhance community resilience to climate change. No more than 25 percent of the revenues generated by this measure will be made available to contribute to this Urban Grant Program. Funds shall be made available through a regularly-scheduled competitive grants program established by the Authority's Board of Directors in its annual budget. Grant awards shall reward a diversity of projects and geographies, with emphasis on underserved communities.

#### **5. Engage and educate the community: *Cultivating the next generation of environmental stewards***

a. Provide free virtual and in person **educational and interpretive programming** for families, youth and seniors to learn about nature, indigenous peoples and local agriculture at Open Space preserves, schools, libraries, community centers and throughout local communities.

b. Expand **volunteer** opportunities and advance workforce development on open space lands.

c. Collaborate with local Tribes to raise public awareness of Indigenous cultures.

d. Work with youth organizations to advance knowledge of nature and nature-based solutions to climate change, develop work skills and career pathways.

#### **6. Protect Agricultural Land and Support Healthy Soils: *Preserving local farms and ranches for food security***

**a. Protect important farmlands and ranchlands for local food and climate benefits including** clean water, water retention, soil carbon, protection against flooding and providing corridors for wildlife movement.

##### **b. Healthy local food**

1. Develop partnerships, policies and programs to support productive and economically viable agriculture on farmlands in Coyote Valley, San Martin, unincorporated Gilroy and other South County farmlands.

##### **c. Supporting Farmers and Ranchers**

1. Develop a “Buy, Invest, Protect, Sell” program to purchase at-risk farmland and provide access to agricultural land to support local farming, limited resource farmers and promote climate-smart farm practices.
2. Partner with Santa Clara County, University of California Cooperative Extension, and non-profit organizations working in agriculture and food systems to provide training and support for small and beginning farmers and ranchers.
3. Provide technical assistance to farmers and ranchers on climate-smart practices that protect healthy soils and improve sustainable agriculture on working lands.
4. Support the development of Santa Clara Valley and Coyote Valley name brands for local agricultural products and promote regional agritourism.

**Examples of projects that could potentially be funded by the Measure include, but are not limited to, the following:**

1. Coyote Valley Conservation Program Area: Expand protected areas and create a regionally significant preserve system with wildlife movement infrastructure, enhanced floodplains, restored wetlands and habitats, public trails and nature-based recreational amenities, environmental education programs, and local climate-smart agriculture.
2. Tilton Ranch: Develop trail and staging area connecting Coyote Valley Open Space Preserve with the historic Tilton Ranch and develop new regional trails in partnership with Santa Clara County Parks and Recreation, the City of San Jose and the City of Morgan Hill.
3. El Toro Peak: Partner with City of Morgan Hill to establish and co-manage a new open space preserve with staging area and trails and restore and maintain natural habitat.
4. Rancho Cañada del Oro Open Space Preserve: Restore and maintain wildlife habitat, expand educational opportunities, and construct new public access amenities and trail connection to Blair Ranch and expand regional trail connections to the Bay Area Ridge Trail.
5. Coyote Valley Open Space Preserve: Build trail accessible to seniors and people with disabilities, expand protected areas and trail system.
6. Máyyan 'Ooyákma – Coyote Ridge Open Space Preserve: develop new regional trail connections to implement the County of Santa Clara Countywide Trails Master Plan and Bay Area Ridge Trail to surrounding conserved lands and parklands (Richmond Ranch, Coyote Valley, Coyote Creek Parkway).
7. Bay Area Ridge Trail: Increase public access by closing gaps in the Bay Area Ridge Trail.
8. Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve: Expand trail system and connections to East San Jose Foothills, Ed Levin County Park and Milpitas Hills through regional trails
9. Coyote Valley Trail Connections: Establish connections from Coyote Valley to Coyote Creek Trail to expand walking and biking trail connections to San Jose and Morgan Hill
10. ADA/Access enhancement: expand Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility improvements to Authority facilities and programs.
11. Upper Pajaro River Area: Protect, restore and maintain lands for floodplain restoration, habitat restoration, landscape connectivity, educational interpretation and sustainable agriculture

**Administrative Provisions and Fiscal Safeguards**

**1. Citizen Oversight and Independent Financial Audits**

To ensure accountability, transparency, and public oversight of all funds collected and allocated under this Measure and to comply with state law, all of the following shall apply:

- a. On or before January 1 of each fiscal year, the Authority's chief fiscal officer shall file an annual report with the Board that explains (1) the amount of funds collected and expended under this Measure and (2) the status of the projects authorized to be funded by this revenue in compliance with Government Code Sections 50075.1(d) and 50075.3.
- b. The Authority shall ensure that an annual independent financial audit of funds collected and expended under this Measure funds is conducted.
- c. The Independent Oversight Committee ("Oversight Committee") created by the Authority in 2015 to review the expenditures of all parcel tax revenues collected under Measure Q (as later modified to include 2020 Measure T) shall review the expenditures of all parcel tax revenues collected under this Measure. With respect to this Measure ##, the Committee's responsibilities shall include – per the Committee's bylaws - reviewing expenditures on an annual basis to ensure they conform to the Expenditure Plan, reviewing the annual report and independent financial audit described above, and submitting its recommendations and oversight report thereon to the Board.
- d. The revenue raised by the Measure for the purposes described in this Expenditure Plan will be administered by the Authority. All funds shall be placed in a separate account to hold all funds collected pursuant to the Measure, and the Authority shall use such funds only for the purposes set forth in this Expenditure Plan.

## 2. Additional Allocation Criteria and Community Benefits

The Authority shall ensure that the revenue generated by the Measure is spent in an efficient and effective manner, consistent with serving the public interest and in accordance with existing law and this Expenditure Plan.

- a. In implementing this Expenditure Plan, the Authority shall make all final decisions regarding implementation of the Plan and funding for any specific project. The Authority shall give priority to projects in the program areas set forth above that meet multiple objectives of the Santa Clara Valley Greenprint, including one or more of the following objectives:
  - i. Have a significant positive effect on the health of land, water, and wildlife habitat, safety, and quality of life for residents within the Authority's jurisdiction.
  - ii. Provide for geographic distribution of projects across the Authority's jurisdiction.
  - iii. Increase impact by leveraging state and federal resources as well as public/private partnerships.

- iv. Strengthen connections between communities and open space through regionally-significant trails and transit access.
  - v. Benefit the economy, sustainability, and climate resiliency of the region by investing in nature-based infrastructure and local workforce development.
  - vi. Engage youth and young adults in local workforce development and assist them in gaining skills and experience related to protection and stewardship of the natural environment, wildlife, water resources, and agricultural lands.
- b. The Board shall conduct one or more public meetings annually to gain public input on the annual budget and selection of project grants to expend revenues generated by the Measure.
- c. The Authority may accumulate revenue over multiple years so that sufficient funding is available for larger and long-term projects. All interest income shall be used for the purposes identified in this Expenditure Plan.
- d. Revenue generated by this Measure may also be used for such administrative expenses as the Board determines are reasonable and necessary through its annual budget process or other appropriate mechanism.
- e. Costs of performing or contracting for project-related work shall be paid from the revenues of the Measure and allocated to the appropriate purpose and project.
- f. To the extent permitted by law, up to one-tenth of one percent (0.1 %) of the gross proceeds of the tax generated by this Measure shall be made available for the Oversight Committee's activities.
- g. Parcel tax proceeds provided under this Measure are intended to augment annual support for the Authority and do not substitute for individual city or County obligations. Monies from this program may not go to a city's or the County's "General Fund."