

Little Hoover Commission – Testimony

Dr. Ana M. Alvarez, Deputy General Manager

East Bay Regional Park District

October 27, 2016

The East Bay Regional Park District is the largest Special Park District in the nation with over 120,000 acres of open space in the Eastern San Francisco Bay Area including: Grasslands, forests, wetlands, shorelines and regional trails. The Park District owns and manages 65 regional parks within 33 cities and across two counties, including 55 miles of Bay-Delta shoreline. Importantly, for the purposes of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the Park District owns and manages over 200 miles of paved, regional trails which provide alternative transportation corridors to connect communities. In essence, the Park District manages the East Bay's green transportation network serving 2.7 million people.

As large scale land manager, the East Bay Regional Park District is **seeing the effects of climate change** every day; and most importantly, the Park District is well-positioned to be **part of California's solution** to the impacts of climate change. The Park District currently plays an important role in protecting and growing carbon stocks on natural and working lands at the heart of the urban interface. The Eastern San Francisco Bay Area is one of the most urbanized regions in California. A recent study by the Environmental Science Associates (ESA) found the average amount of carbon sequestered by the Park District's lands is over **300,000 metric tons**. That is the:

- Equivalent of **removing 59,300 passenger cars** and sport utility vehicles from the road annually, with added bonus of **saving approximately over 37.7 million gallons of gasoline**.
- Equivalent to **\$6.9 million a year in natural infrastructure economic benefits**.

By providing landscape-level protection and management of public lands, the District is already helping to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate.

As a leader in the Special Park District community, the District is embarking on a Climate Change Resiliency Strategy, which will help guide land use and operational planning based on the key notion of repositioning the lands' important role in ecosystem benefits and natural infrastructure services. As part of the strategy, the Park District is:

- Currently assessing the opportunity to enter the carbon market through Carbon farming.
- Conducting additional riparian enhancements for carbon sequestration and regeneration of aquifers.
- Utilizing green waste to create biomass energy.
- Exploring additional water and solar opportunities.

Ultimately, the District intends to provide a **national model for** the role **all park agencies** can serve as the challenges of a changing climate persist.

The East Bay Regional Park District aims to maximize its natural green infrastructure to help manage climate change impacts; to protect cultural and natural resources; as well as to continue contributing to the quality of life for all people of the Bay Area while planning for the future. The San Francisco Bay Area is projected to grow by two million people by 2040. Increasing the urban tree canopy and expansion of green infrastructure plays an important role in carbon sequestration while providing respite from extreme temperatures.

Many of the **East Bay's most disadvantaged communities reside along the shoreline** and are vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise. Enhanced protection from flooding caused by storm surges or sea level rise significantly contributes to shoreline resiliency. Steps to increase resiliency include the restoration of wetlands, beaches, tidal marshes and dune habitats to protect coastal infrastructure in and around the San Francisco Bay-Delta Area. Currently, to embark on these types of projects **at least eight state and federal agencies have a role in permitting of Bay-Delta wetlands** – creating delay in project delivery.

The Park District has already successfully completed shoreline resiliency projects:

- The Breuner Marsh investment in Richmond is an example of wetland restoration for carbon sequestration, sea level resiliency and coastal access for a disadvantaged community.
- Sand replenishment efforts along Shoreline Drive in Alameda was initiated by the District to protect the community from storm surges – and also act as a buffer zone for homes and infrastructure at-risk to sea level rise.

Without a doubt, a clean and healthy Bay is the first line of defense in protecting billions of dollars of infrastructure from storm surges and sea level rise. Recognizing this, Bay Area voters enacted **Measure AA** in June – a nine county bond measure to invest \$500 million into shoreline restoration and protection. A key restoration goal is to prevent emergencies before they happen. The measure has a 20-year sunset, so projects need to be fast tracked – waiting five to eight years for permit approval runs counterintuitive to the goals of the measure. Emergency permits can be obtained more quickly, but only after something has failed. **Permitting practices need to take into account resiliency, mitigation and adaptation.**

In addition, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife currently interprets existing law as requiring all entities (public, private businesses and non-profits) **to set aside restricted endowments** when mitigating for projects on their own land. Endowments are one way to guarantee the stewardship of lands in perpetuity where conservation easements are required. The Park District's **sole purpose, however, is to acquire and manage land for open space, public recreation and natural resource protection**, as stated in the

Master Plan, yet the District is being held to the same endowment standard as large scale developers. Requiring Park District General Fund dollars to be locked up in an endowment is redundant and doubles the cost burden on local tax payers for managing specified habitat enhancements or conservation lands in the East Bay. **Locking up General Fund dollars in a permanent endowment reduces the District's ability to hire more staff** for stewardship and management of the very sensitive habitat public lands the Department is seeking to protect.

Senator Bob Wieckowski, at the Park District's request, authored SB 1020 to address this relatively new interpretation by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife that public resource agencies should set aside endowments from their General Fund which can then no longer be used for staff and operational maintenance of sensitive habitats. This legislation affirms the privilege of the Department of Fish and Wildlife to require local agencies to establish endowments for maintenance and mitigation of natural lands. However, it also affirms the ability of the Department of Fish and Wildlife to **use discretion when public resources from public land management agencies have the very core mission of protecting natural resources as part of the agency's ongoing responsibilities and operations.** Senator Wieckowski's legislation led to a two-year safe harbor agreement with the Department of Fish and Wildlife while a working group, including the District and other stakeholders, work to determine alternatives to endowments. To date, this working group has not moved this charge forward.

The Park District calls on the Little Hoover Commission to address the permitting practices of state agencies, including the need to determine alternatives to endowments, to ensure pre-disaster resiliency projects are afforded the same prompt consideration as emergencies. Addressing this important delay challenge would go a long way toward making it easier for the District and all Special Districts to become **part of California's solution** to the impacts climate change.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Commission.