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# POINT REYES LIGHT

### NEWS

## Measure A overcomes ag opponents

by **Ike Allen**  
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Measure A, Marin's sales tax for parks and open space, passed easily at the ballot box again, despite heightened scrutiny. The quarter-cent tax, which pays for the maintenance and acquisition of county parks, open space preserves and protected farmland, first passed in 2012 with little opposition. But opinions on the preservation of farmland have shifted in recent years, and the months leading up to last Tuesday's primary saw targeted opposition to the measure from a group that cast Measure A grants for agricultural easements as public entitlements for private businesses.

Criticism of the farmland allocation and its beneficiaries, the Marin Agricultural Land Trust and the Marin Resource Conservation District, betrayed rifts in the alliance between environmentalists and ranching advocates that led to the creation of those groups. MALT and the R.C.D. faced accusations of impropriety, and a first draft of the county's Measure A spending plan cut their funding in half, before the parks department restored it with new conditions.

Yet for all the soul-searching, Measure A enjoyed the same margin of support that it did a decade ago—about 75 percent.

“I’m pretty ecstatic that our community could vote to support it on this level,” said Nancy Scolari, executive director of the R.C.D., which will receive 20 percent of the rechristened “sustainable agriculture” allocation. “It’s a really great opportunity to support our environmental values, whether on public or private land.”

“Nature knows no boundaries” between county land and farmland, Ms. Scolari said, and the latter takes up much more space in Marin. Conservation projects like riparian restoration are just as beneficial to the public and the environment on pastures as they are in parks, she argued.

Yet opponents of Measure A saw a sharp boundary between public and private. In its new form, the tax will provide the R.C.D. with about \$640,000 annually, much more than the sliver of farmland preservation funding that it currently receives. This put the district, which uses the funds and other public monies to help farmers with carbon farming and stream restoration work, in the spotlight leading up to the primary.

A North Bay Bohemian/Pacific Sun article published in late May focused on the R.C.D.’s practice of funding conservation projects on properties owned by its own directors. With all its board members required to be local landowners and no policy barring the board from approving projects that would benefit its own, the district is an insider’s club, according to reporter Peter Byrne.

Far from prioritizing natural resources, Mr. Byrne wrote, “in practice, the M.R.C.D.’s historical mission may be more accurately described as protecting the profitability of ranching operations impacted by the rising costs of complying with increasingly stringent environmental regulations.”

R.C.D. directors are not barred from participating in conservation projects or applying for associated grants, the district’s website says, but they recuse themselves from the vote and are only selected through a “competitive application process.” The projects are not private improvements, the site says, but elements of a “larger effort to accomplish a specific environmental goal for public benefit.”

Ms. Scolari said the technical advisory committee that determines the worthiness of conservation projects might include one or two board members, but not those who could benefit from the project. And she said the requirement that directors be landowners is written into the California law governing resource conservation districts, although that law is controversial and could eventually be changed. An R.C.D. director must live in the district and own real property there or serve as an associate director for two years before becoming a director, according to the California Public Resource Code. Ms. Scolari said the district has three associate directors who could eventually become directors. But, she added, “We have never had people banging on our door to try to become board members. It’s a commitment.”

“It’s good that the public is paying more attention to this,” Ms. Scolari said. “Twenty years ago, we were calling people, begging them to apply to our programs. Here we are today with a long list of ranchers who want to do this, and we have a public who cares deeply about the way this money is spent.” Yet she believes the R.C.D. was misunderstood by some opponents, whose scrutiny of Measure A was being driven by opposition to ranching in the Point Reyes National Seashore, a separate issue.

The final draft of the Measure A spending plan was a compromise, keeping the overall farmland allocation the same but reducing the easement acquisition fund by half and opening the remainder to a more diverse range of stewardship grants that could go to smaller projects like community gardens. Parks director Max Korten said the high level of support for the measure made it clear that Marin residents endorse spending on all three categories: parks, open space and farmland.

Though the farmland allocation played an outsized role in public discussions about Measure A expenditures, in total it accounts for just one fifth of the roughly \$16 million that the tax takes in every year. Maintenance of county parks, including wildfire mitigation, makes up the bulk of spending. Invasive species control and habitat restoration at the Bolinas Lagoon and a planning process for restoration work at Roy’s Redwoods are the most recent West Marin parks projects funded by the tax.

The newly approved Measure A won’t begin generating revenue until October, and the parks department’s budget for the coming fiscal year shows it plans to spend the remaining \$4.7 million remaining balance of sales tax funds largely on park facilities and landscaping, vegetation management and staff salaries. But depending on

whether MALT or the R.C.D. applies for funds, some of the remaining balance could be diverted to farmland.

MALT was formed to create a financial incentive for ranchers to join the project of protecting Marin's open spaces from development. The trust would pay for an easement from ranchers, usually at about half the value of their land, to block any future subdivision. Later, MALT easements began to require that the land be used for agriculture indefinitely. The system brokered an uneasy alliance of agriculturalists and environmentalists. But recent debates over MALT's work and its alleged improprieties have shown that enthusiasm for agricultural easements is flagging, especially among those who opposed longer ranching leases in the seashore.

In 2020, MALT came under fire over alleged conflicts of interest. The trust had failed to disclose a lower property appraisal to the county when applying for Measure A funds, and later returned the grant. Soon, a North Bay Bohemian/Pacific Sun story described examples of easements that benefited the trust's board members. MALT denied wrongdoing, but later updated its conflict-of-interest policy. The trust's critics argue that its easements, many partially funded by Measure A grants, enrich multigenerational ranching families based on the far-fetched or even nonexistent threat that their ranches could be developed. MALT already owns development rights to 54,000 acres of Marin land, while the parks department protects just 18,000 acres.

Jennifer Carlin, MALT's interim executive director, said the trust is planning new easements on seven agricultural properties, the majority of which will be boosted by applications for Measure A grants.

The closest to completion is an easement on the McDowell Ranch, a 723-acre property on the Tomales-Petaluma Road. The purchase will be funded in part by the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, and in part by a \$1.8 million Measure A grant, if supervisors approve a new allocation in July.

Ms. Carlin said she was "heartened and encouraged" by the passage of Measure A, and she responded to descriptions of MALT easements as commercial subsidies. "Those farmers and ranchers are giving up future revenue potential by giving up

those development rights,” she said. “They’re doing something that is really for the public good. It is a business transaction, but with that comes a responsibility to be good environmental stewards.”

Some Marin voters who approved Measure A may have done so in spite of, rather than because of, the farmland allocation. In a survey conducted in late 2020 by the parks department, respondents ranked farmland preservation lowest on a list of Measure A spending priorities, with more than a third responding that the allocation should receive less funding in the future.

But even some who seriously questioned the farmland spending reaffirmed their overall support for the measure. In public comments to the county last year, Access 4 Bikes president Vernon Huffman argued that agricultural easements don’t provide enough public access to lands and voiced support for adding trails across MALTed ranches.

“If we’re going to spend our public tax dollars on agricultural easements, I think the public should get a return beyond a visual benefit,” he told the Light at the time. But Access 4 Bikes still donated \$2,500 to the campaign in support of renewing Measure A in March.

Support for Marin’s parks clearly outweighed reservations about farm preservation for some voters. “Most people say: ‘Hey, I didn’t get everything I wanted, but if I got 80 percent of it, that’s pretty good,’” Mr. Korten said.

The Measure A campaign’s biggest donors were the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria and MALT. The Sonoma County-based tribal authority that represents Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok gave \$100,000, and the land trust gave \$150,000. The Marin Conservation League and Marin Open Space Trust each gave \$10,000.

Yet some Marin residents vocally opposed Measure A even as they supported tax dollars for public parks, saying the farmland allocation was a dealbreaker. Martin Griffin, the veteran conservationist who founded Audubon Canyon Ranch and was part of the movement to halt development in West Marin, wrote a letter in the Light arguing Measure A was “fatally compromised” by allocations for MALT and the

R.C.D. Mr. Griffin gave \$5,000 to a “No on Measure A 2022” campaign led by Mill Valley resident Linda Rames.

The farmland allocation survived and Measure A passed handily. But the discussions and accusations have put pressure on MALT and the R.C.D. to better demonstrate the public benefit of their work. In March and April, MALT held free guided hikes at the Evans Nicasio, McIsaac, Rocky Canyon, Gallagher North Bend and Millerton Creek Ranches. All five properties are protected under easements funded by the sales tax. “We made a concerted effort to open up Measure A-funded easements for hikes,” Ms. Carlin said.

MALT’s efforts to preserve farmland will continue over the next decade, but only half as many Measure A dollars will be available for agricultural easements, chipping away at the public resources available to bankroll the trust’s acquisitions. And though public support for Measure A may be as strong as ever, the underlying priorities of voters could continue to shift.

“There are changes in this version of the measure based on what we heard from folks,” Mr. Korten said. “I would imagine that when this measure expires in nine years, there might be some additional changes.”

*An earlier version of this article misstated the donations made by the Marin Agricultural Land Trust to the campaign supporting Measure A. Campaign finance documents show MALT donated a total of \$150,000 by June 7, not \$52,000, making it the campaign’s largest donor. Additionally, the treasurer for the campaign opposing the Measure A renewal was Linda Rames of Mill Valley, not Bruce Raful.*

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