



TERRA LAWSON-REMER

VICE-CHAIR

**SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: June 24, 2025

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TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**ADVANCING REGIONAL ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THE TIJUANA RIVER SEWAGE
AND WAIVE BOARD POLICY A-72 (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

This year's budget reflects the harsh fiscal reality facing cities and counties across California. County staff have worked to deliver a balanced budget despite inflation, economic pressures, and continued federal instability. But while the budget meets our legal obligation, it does not meet every community need, particularly for families living on the frontlines of environmental pollution.

Nowhere is that gap more visible than in the Tijuana River Valley and our coastal communities, where residents continue to face the fallout of recurring sewage spills, toxic air, and industrial waste. Our Congressional delegation secured \$650 million to upgrade the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, a major step forward. But construction will take years, and the project addresses only part of the broader contamination problem. In the meantime, millions of gallons of polluted runoff continue to flood into our region, and our residents are left to shoulder the consequences.

Alongside water contamination, dangerous levels of hydrogen sulfide continue to pose a serious public health risk for residents in the Tijuana River Valley and surrounding communities. This toxic gas, released from decaying sewage and industrial waste, has been linked to headaches, respiratory irritation, and long-term health concerns. Families have reported nausea and fatigue, schools have raised alarms, and frontline neighborhoods continue to bear the brunt.

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In response, the County and the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District are purchasing 10,000 air purifiers to help reduce indoor exposure—but this is a temporary stopgap, not a systemic fix. Without deeper investments in monitoring, mitigation, and long-term health protections, the crisis will only escalate. This is not an infrastructure nuisance; it is a growing public health emergency that demands urgent, coordinated action.

This year's budget required tough choices. Without new revenues or changes to County reserve policy, not every urgent need could be addressed. As a result, some critical investments were left unfunded, especially those responding to long-standing environmental harms. While public testimony at the June 2025 Budget Hearings reflected a wide range of community needs, the crisis in the Tijuana River Valley remains especially urgent. Local governments must continue to step up.

In partnership with Imperial Beach Mayor Paloma Aguirre, this action supports key elements of her County Sewage Action Plan — including targeted stormwater upgrades to eliminate toxic hot spots, enhanced school air filtration, a hydrogen sulfide health study, and strengthened regional coordination. These community-driven priorities reflect what South County families are experiencing every day.

The proposed program options areas include:

Matching Funds to Protect Kids from Toxic Air at School:

Create a County matching fund to support air filtration and HVAC upgrades in schools and childcare centers impacted by Tijuana River pollution, leveraging contributions from school districts, APCD, state and federal grants, philanthropy, and others.

Launching an Epidemiological Public Health Impact Study:

Initiate a multi-year health impact study on chronic hydrogen sulfide exposure by convening County public health staff, academic researchers, and philanthropic partners to generate the region's first longitudinal dataset on exposure and health outcomes.

Infrastructure Matching Funds to Eliminate Toxic Hot Spots:

Establishing a County matching fund to remediate toxic hot spots along the Tijuana River — starting with hydrogen sulfide releases at Saturn Boulevard — through stormwater infrastructure upgrades that reduce surface disturbance and protect public health.

Economic Impact Study:

Commission a comprehensive economic impact analysis of the sewage crisis — expanding beyond the County's prior survey on small business impacts limited to Imperial Beach — to quantify losses to tourism, business, and property values and strengthen advocacy for state and federal investment.

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Designating a County Sewage Crisis Chief:

Designate a dedicated County lead to coordinate emergency response efforts, secure funding, align agency actions, and keep impacted communities informed and engaged.

These proposals are practical responses to ongoing community impacts and reflect the urgency of addressing long-standing local health and infrastructure failures. In moments of fiscal pressure, it is especially important that we remain clear on our values and ensure public health, environmental safety, and accountability are uplifted.

This item does not propose new spending today but directs the Chief Administrative Officer to evaluate the programmatic options, recommend the most impactful and feasible next steps, and develop a funding and implementation strategy for those selected.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

VICE CHAIR TERRA LAWSON-REMER

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to evaluate the programmatic options below and develop strategic recommendations identifying which initiatives the County may prioritize for implementation—focusing on opportunities aligned with core County functions, that offer the greatest public health impact, and that can be leveraged to attract outside funding.

Based on that prioritization, develop an implementation roadmap for the selected programs, including potential funding strategies, which should include, but not limited to unassigned fund balances made available by a revised reserve policy, mid-year quarterly budget adjustments through operating results, state and federal grants, philanthropic partnerships, intergovernmental cost-sharing, and other potential revenue options.

The programs are as follows:

- a. **Matching Funds to Protect Kids from Toxic Air at School:** including air filtration and HVAC upgrades in schools and childcare centers impacted by cross-border pollution, leveraging contributions from school districts, the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District, state and federal grants, and philanthropic partners;
- b. **Launching an epidemiological public health impact study** on chronic hydrogen sulfide exposure by convening County public health staff, state and federal agencies, academic researchers, and philanthropic funders to assess long-term health outcomes among impacted residents;
- c. **Infrastructure Matching Funds to Eliminate Toxic Hot Spots** to remediate infrastructure and toxic hot spots along the Tijuana River — such as upgrades at Saturn Boulevard to mitigate aerosolization.
- d. **Economic Impact Study** to assess the full scope of losses caused by the sewage crisis — including impacts to small businesses, property values, and

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regional tourism — to strengthen future funding and mitigation efforts;

- e. **Designating a County Sewage Crisis Chief** to coordinate emergency response efforts, secure and align infrastructure funding, engage with partner agencies, and keep affected communities informed and supported. The position should be structured and organized in a manner that ensures focused leadership while making efficient use of existing County resources.

Return to the Board on September 30, 2025, with strategic recommendations for Board consideration.

2. Establish an ad hoc subcommittee of this Board, entitled the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis, and appoint Supervisors representing the most impacted coastal communities, District 1 and District 3. The subcommittee will provide focused oversight of mitigation efforts, explore new opportunities and partnerships, coordinate interagency and binational collaboration, and develop actionable recommendations for further Board action. It shall also guide the integration of health and environmental monitoring data, support public engagement efforts, identify aligned funding opportunities, and ensure readiness for emergency response needs as they arise.
3. Waive Board Policy A-72 Agenda and Related Process, Section 2.C.2.ii, which establishes required timelines for review when preparing a Board Letter.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Residents living near the Tijuana River have faced ongoing exposure to unsafe air and environmental hazards. This item prioritizes practical investments, like school air filtration and health impact studies, that respond to clear, place-based risks affecting working families and children. By focusing resources where the health consequences are most acute, the County is taking a fair and measured approach to ensure all communities have access to basic public safety and clean environments, regardless of geography.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

This item supports long-term regional stability by addressing preventable public health threats and infrastructure gaps that, if ignored, will become more costly and disruptive over time. Improving indoor air quality in schools, gathering reliable health data, and coordinating regional response efforts all contribute to a more proactive, cost-effective approach to managing environmental risks. Identifying funding now allows the County to strengthen its ability to respond to future challenges without placing additional strain on core services or emergency systems.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with this action at this time. This item directs staff to explore potential funding sources; any future fiscal impacts will depend on the specific funding options

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identified. This action does not result in a change to the net General Fund cost and does not require any additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

The persistent impacts of the Tijuana River sewage crisis have disrupted local commerce, deterred tourism, and placed an ongoing burden on small businesses operating in coastal and border-adjacent communities. By identifying funding to improve conditions in affected areas, this item supports efforts to restore public confidence, reduce business disruption, and strengthen the long-term economic stability of communities that have faced repeated environmental setbacks beyond their control.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

The Tijuana River sewage crisis is one of the most enduring public health and environmental failures in our region. For decades, families in the Tijuana River Valley and nearby coastal communities have faced chronic exposure to raw sewage, airborne toxins, and coastal water pollution, conditions that continue to threaten health, disrupt daily life, and erode public trust.

Despite persistent advocacy and local action, the scale of this crisis still far outpaces available resources. Residents report headaches, nausea, and respiratory symptoms linked to hydrogen sulfide gas from decaying sewage and industrial waste. Schools and homes have been overwhelmed by noxious air. Small businesses face beach closures and lost revenue. And the long-term health consequences remain unknown, due to a lack of formal studies.

Our Congressional delegation secured \$650 million to upgrade the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant, a long-overdue step forward. But construction will take years, and the project addresses only part of a broader, systemic breakdown in binational infrastructure. Meanwhile, polluted runoff continues to flow into our region, leaving local residents to bear the brunt.

While the FY 2025–26 County Budget was responsibly balanced amid economic pressure, it was not able to fund every urgent need. Several high-impact proposals to address the Tijuana River emergency include school air filtration upgrades, a long-term health impact study, stormwater infrastructure improvements, and broader coordination capacity. In the face of persistent federal shortfalls, the County must take a deliberate and strategic approach—evaluating these proposals and preparing to take urgent action. County staff should assess these proposals based on alignment with County core responsibilities and track record, potential public health impact, and opportunities to leverage external funding.

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This item directs the Chief Administrative Officer to assess the identified programmatic options and return with recommendations that prioritize the most feasible and impactful next steps, including an implementation roadmap and funding strategy for those selected. This ensures the County is ready to act with clarity and coordination as opportunities and partnerships emerge.

These programs include:

- **Matching Funds for Protect Kids from Toxic Air at School:** Establish a County matching fund to help upgrade outdated HVAC and install air filtration systems in schools and childcare centers impacted by Tijuana River pollution. Children are especially vulnerable to airborne toxins like hydrogen sulfide, methane, and volatile organic compounds—and can't focus on learning when breathing toxic air. Building on recent County and Air Pollution Control District distributions of home air filters, these match dollars will be layered with contributions from other sources, including but not limited to: school districts, the San Diego Air Pollution Control District, state and federal grants, and philanthropic partners. By ensuring clean classroom air, we protect children's health and learning where pollution impacts are most severe.
- **Launching an Epidemiological Public Health Impact Study:** Residents in the Tijuana River Valley and surrounding coastal communities are experiencing repeated exposures to hydrogen sulfide—symptoms range from nausea, headaches, and shortness of breath to eye and throat irritation. To date, neither the California Department of Public Health nor the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry have conducted a long-term epidemiological study on chronic H₂S exposure in our region; existing assessments focus primarily on short-term air, soil, and water sampling. This program would direct County staff to convene public health experts, academic partners, and philanthropic funders to design and execute a multi-year health impact study—providing the first comprehensive, longitudinal data on H₂S exposures and associated health outcomes among frontline residents.
- **Infrastructure Matching Funds to Eliminate Toxic Hot Spots:** Establish a matching fund to tackle toxic hot spots along the Tijuana River, seeking partnerships with state, federal, and local stakeholders to maximize impact. For example, at Saturn Boulevard, the Tijuana River enters a culvert where churning water releases dangerous hydrogen sulfide into the air. This funding will support critical upgrades to stormwater infrastructure, reduce surface disturbance, and protect the health of those who live and work nearby.
- **Economic Impact Study:** The financial cost of this crisis is significant. Businesses along the coast are losing customers, tourism is taking a hit, and property values are plummeting. The County previously conducted a small-scale economic study focused on a limited sample of small businesses in Imperial Beach, but the true impacts are far broader. A more comprehensive analysis is urgently needed to quantify the full scope of

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economic harm across the region — from lost tourism revenue to stalled development and long-term property devaluation. This data will strengthen our case for sustained state and federal investment to address the crisis.

- **Designating a County Sewage Crisis Chief:** We need a clearly identified County lead to drive our Tijuana River sewage response — someone whose principal focus is protecting public health, coordinating infrastructure solutions, securing funding, and ensuring accountability. Establishing this role will ensure efforts across agencies and jurisdictions are aligned, partnerships are advanced, and impacted communities remain informed and supported. The position should be structured and organized in a manner that ensures focused leadership while making efficient use of existing County resources.
- **Formation of a Tijuana River Valley Sewage Crisis Ad Hoc Subcommittee:** Establish an Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis, composed of Supervisors from the most affected districts (Districts 1 and 3). This Subcommittee will oversee our response, identify and cultivate new philanthropic, intergovernmental, and community partnerships, and develop actionable recommendations to mitigate ongoing public health and environmental risks.

This action does not commit funds today but builds the foundation for a more responsive, structured, and forward-looking local response. By doing so, it ensures that when funding opportunities arise, the County is prepared to act with clarity and urgency.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed actions support the County of San Diego's 2025–2030 Strategic Initiatives of Sustainability, Empowerment, Community, and Justice by identifying targeted opportunities to address public health risks, improve infrastructure performance, and ensure that all communities benefit from effective regional coordination. This item also reflects the County's commitment to data-informed decision-making, collaborative governance, and practical solutions that strengthen regional resilience and public trust.

Respectfully submitted,



Terra Lawson-Remer
Supervisor, Third District

ATTACHMENT(S)
N/A