



County Of San Diego

Board Of Supervisors

1600 Pacific Highway, Room 335, San Diego, California 92101-2470

Agenda Item

Date: September 1, 2026

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To: Board of Supervisors

Advancing Infrastructure at the Saturn Boulevard Hot Spot to Reduce Tijuana River Valley Toxic Air Pollution (Districts: All)

Overview

The Tijuana River Valley (TJRV) and surrounding communities continue to experience severe impacts from untreated sewage, toxic urban runoff, and noxious airborne emissions from the Tijuana River, resulting in recurring contamination of coastal waters and nearby neighborhoods. These conditions pose significant risks to public health, degrade environmental resources, and disrupt local economic activity in coastal and border-adjacent communities.

A major focus of the County's five-point response has been working to address the pollution "hot spot" at Saturn Boulevard, where stagnant, contaminated river flows create heavy foaming and release dangerous levels of hydrogen sulfide into the air, making nearby residents sick.

Although the Saturn Boulevard culvert is located within the City of San Diego, the County is stepping up because of the urgency of the TJRV crisis and the immediate public health threat from toxic air pollution. The County and City are working together on agreements needed to advance both near-term mitigation and a permanent infrastructure solution. The County is moving quickly to reduce pollution at Saturn Boulevard now, while doing the advance work needed to deliver a permanent solution as soon as construction funding is secured.

In 2025, the Board funded a study of solutions for the Saturn Boulevard hot spot. Completed in January 2026, it recommended extending the existing culvert pipes as a practical near-term measure to keep the outfalls submerged and reduce harmful emissions. The Board approved \$2.5 million for the project and directed staff to move quickly toward implementation. The County and City of San Diego signed an agreement in June to advance design, permitting, access, and future maintenance. Design is now underway, with construction anticipated in 2027.

At the same time, the County is doing the work needed to be ready for a permanent fix. The feasibility study identified replacement of the failing culverts beneath Saturn Boulevard with a larger box culvert as the most practical long-term option. The project would allow water to move

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more freely through the channel, reducing the turbulence that releases harmful gases into the air. It would also improve flood protection, reduce road overtopping, and make access to the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park more reliable.

Today's item considers a \$4 million investment to advance design, environmental review, and permitting for that permanent project. This is not duplicative of the interim work. The pipe extension addresses an immediate public health problem with funding already in place while the County works to secure the much larger investment needed for the permanent solution. The County has applied for State Proposition 4 funding and is pursuing other state and federal funding resources for construction.

By advancing the design work for a permanent infrastructure solution at Saturn Boulevard now, the County can move more swiftly toward implementation after funding is secured. If long-term construction funding becomes available soon, the County will be positioned to pivot from construction of the temporary solution to the permanent solution. If it does not, the interim project can still provide needed relief while that funding is pursued.

Recommendation by Chair Terra Lawson-Remer and Chair Pro-Tem Paloma Aguirre

- 1) Find that the proposed activity is not subject to review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Sections 15060(c)(3) and 15378(b)(5). The proposed activity constitutes an organizational or administrative activity of government that will not result in direct or indirect physical changes in the environment and therefore is not a "project" subject to CEQA.
- 2) Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to allocate \$4,000,000 within the Unlocked Reserves Framework for the environmental review, permitting, and design of the Saturn Boulevard Box Culvert/Bridge project. Should alternative funding be identified, the \$4,000,000 will support immediate needs for the Tijuana River Valley, consistent with prior Board direction.
- 3) Transfer appropriations of \$4,000,000 from Finance Other, Services & Supplies to the Department of Public Works, General Fund, Services & Supplies for the environmental review, permitting and design of the Saturn Boulevard Box Culvert/Bridge project, based on available prior year Unrestricted General Fund balance identified as Unlocked Reserves.
- 4) Authorize the Director, Department of Purchasing and Contracting, in accordance with Board Policy A-87 and Administrative Code Section 401 , to amend contract No. 573276 with Parsons Transportation Group, Inc., contract No. 573277 with Dokken Engineering, contract No. 573278 with Nasland Engineering, and contract No. 573279 with Rick Engineering Company for As Needed Engineering, Project Management and Land Surveying Services to increase the annual value by \$1,500,000 per contract for the remaining four-year term; and to amend contracts as needed to reflect changes in services and funding allocation. This increase will provide sufficient capacity to complete design and construction support services for the Saturn Boulevard Box Culvert/Bridge Project.
- 5) Direct the Chief Administrative Officer, or designee, to begin working with the City of San

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Diego and the United States Navy on an agreement to move forward in partnership for the environmental review, permitting, design, access, and other pre-construction components for the permanent solution at Saturn Boulevard.

Equity Impact Statement

Residents in communities across the region, including Imperial Beach, Nestor, San Ysidro, and adjacent neighborhoods, continue to be disproportionately affected by the Tijuana River sewage crisis. A November 2024 community health assessment by the County and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found that nearly two-thirds of surveyed households reported physical health symptoms and a decline in quality of life linked to pollution from the TJRV. These impacts are concentrated in communities with higher proportions of low-income and vulnerable residents, highlighting significant environmental justice and public health disparities in our region.

The actions recommended today seek to reduce these inequities by accelerating permanent infrastructure solutions that will improve environmental conditions and health outcomes for the communities most burdened by the crisis, including those affected by poor air quality near the Saturn Boulevard hot spot. By investing in sustainable infrastructure and health studies, the County aims to reduce exposure disparities, protect vulnerable populations, and promote a healthier environment for residents throughout the region.

Sustainability Impact Statement

Today's proposed actions advance social, environmental, health, and well-being sustainability goals of the County of San Diego by protecting public health, improving air and water quality, and supporting responsible land management in the Tijuana River Valley. Specifically, these measures align with County Sustainability Goal #4 (Health & Well-Being), ensuring healthy environments and communities, as well as Goal #5 (Water Quality) and Goal #6 (Thriving Natural Ecosystems). By investing in pollution mitigation infrastructure and environmental remediation at Saturn Boulevard, the County is working to restore natural water flow and reduce hazardous emissions, thereby safeguarding environmental resources and public health. These efforts, undertaken in collaboration with local, state, and federal partners, will help protect water resources, promote ecological restoration, and improve the resilience of communities and ecosystems throughout the region. Reducing transboundary pollution and its impacts supports long-term sustainability, ensuring that residents and visitors can continue to safely enjoy the region's unique coastal and riverine environments for generations to come.

Fiscal Impact

Funds for this request are included in the Fiscal Year 2026–27 Operational Plan in Finance Other. If approved, this action will result in a one-time cost of \$4,000,000 for the design, permitting, and environmental review for the Saturn Boulevard Box Culvert/Bridge project. The funding source is prior year Unrestricted General Fund fund balance made available as unlocked reserves and included in Finance Other to address infrastructure issues, protect public health and continue to mitigate the sewage issues in the region. This funding will cover project planning and design activities only and will not fund construction of the Saturn Boulevard improvement. Preliminary estimates place the total construction cost of the Box Culvert/Bridge project at approximately \$23 million; staff will continue to pursue state and federal funding opportunities

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and return to the Board for any future construction funding recommendations. There will be no additional staff years required to implement today's actions.

Business Impact Statement

The cross-border sewage pollution in the Tijuana River Valley continues to negatively impact local economic activity, particularly harming small businesses and tourism in the coastal and border-adjacent communities of the South Bay. Recurring beach closures and environmental health concerns create operational challenges and uncertainty for local businesses, including those in the hospitality, recreation, and agriculture sectors. By directing resources toward a permanent infrastructure fix at Saturn Boulevard and continuing to address public health hazards, the County of San Diego is working to stabilize the local economy, reduce business disruptions, and support the long-term economic resilience of affected communities. Restoring clean air and safe recreational spaces in the South Bay will help protect jobs, encourage tourism, and improve the quality of life which is essential for a thriving regional economy.

Advisory Board Statement

N/A

Background

The Tijuana River Valley (TJRV) has experienced decades of environmental degradation caused by untreated sewage, industrial waste, and urban runoff flowing across the United States–Mexico border. These conditions have resulted in recurring contamination of waterways, beaches, and adjacent neighborhoods, contributing to degraded environmental quality, frequent recreational closures, and ongoing public health concerns for residents of South Bay communities. Documented impacts include exposure to noxious odors and airborne contaminants, diminished quality of life, and economic disruption affecting tourism, small businesses, and outdoor recreation. In recognition of the severity and persistence of these impacts, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors proclaimed a local emergency on June 27, 2023 (17), which has been regularly renewed to facilitate coordinated action with local, state, and federal partners.

On June 24, 2025 (10), the Board established the Ad Hoc Subcommittee on the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis and adopted a five-point response framework directing the Chief Administrative Officer to advance public health research, evaluate infrastructure solutions for priority pollution hot spots, beginning with Saturn Boulevard, and strengthen interagency coordination and funding strategies. Subsequent Board actions authorized epidemiological health studies to better understand the impacts of chronic exposure to airborne contaminants, initiated an economic impact analysis to quantify losses in affected communities, and funded a feasibility study to identify infrastructure options to mitigate the aerosolization of harmful pollutants at the Saturn Boulevard crossing.

Saturn Boulevard has been identified as a critical “hot spot” within the TJRV due to the configuration and condition of the existing culverts, which create significant turbulence, foaming, and release of hydrogen sulfide emissions during dry and wet weather flows. These conditions have raised concerns among nearby residents and park users and underscored the need for both immediate mitigation and a durable, permanent infrastructure solution. In response to

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Board direction, the County completed the Saturn Boulevard Feasibility Study in January 2026, which evaluated a range of short-, mid-, and long-term alternatives to address the source of airborne emissions at this location.

The Feasibility Study identified a short-term measure, a temporary culvert (pipe) extension to submerge the outfall, as a practical option that could be implemented quickly to reduce emissions while more permanent solutions were being developed. The feasibility study also determined that a Box Culvert/Bridge alternative represents an effective and practical permanent infrastructure solution at Saturn Boulevard. This alternative would replace the existing culverts with a larger box culvert/bridge structure and regrade the channel to reduce elevation drops, turbulence, and foaming, while improving flow conveyance, resiliency, and long-term maintenance performance. Compared to other permanent infrastructure options, the Box Culvert/Bridge offers similar effectiveness with fewer channel impacts and lower lifecycle costs, and avoids the higher expense and complexity associated with a full bridge replacement.

Advancing environmental review, permitting, and design for the Saturn Boulevard Box Culvert/Bridge project will position the County to pursue state and federal construction funding and implement a permanent infrastructure solution that will help mitigate the air quality impacts of the pollution at the Saturn Boulevard “hot spot”. This approach is consistent with prior Board direction to prioritize sustainable, long-term investments that protect public health, improve environmental conditions, and enhance resilience for affected South Bay communities while maintaining strong coordination with the City of San Diego, the United States Navy, and other partner agencies.

Environmental Statement

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15060(c)(3) provides that CEQA applies only to activities that qualify as "projects" under CEQA Guidelines Section 15378. CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(b)(5) provides that organizational or administrative activities of government agencies that will not result in direct or indirect physical changes in the environment do not constitute projects. Accordingly, such activities are not subject to CEQA review.

Today's action authorizes the allocation of funds to support design, engineering, and environmental review for the proposed Saturn Boulevard Box Culvert/Bridge Project. The action is administrative and fiscal in nature and does not approve construction, authorize any ground-disturbing activities, or commit the County to implementation of the proposed project. Completion of design and environmental review may result in project modifications. or a determination that the project should not proceed. Accordingly, today's action is not a project pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(b)(5) and is therefore not subject to CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15060(c)(3). Any future discretionary action approving or implementing the proposed project will be subject to CEQA review, as appropriate, before any construction or other ground-disturbing activities are authorized.

Linkage To The County Of San Diego Strategic Plan

Today's actions align with the County of San Diego's 2026–2031 Strategic Plan “Equity” and “Community” initiatives by addressing longstanding environmental injustices and improving

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quality of life in the South Region. By investing in infrastructure that addresses the air quality impacts of transboundary pollution at the Saturn Boulevard “hot spot” and advancing scientific studies to inform public health protections, this item supports the County’s efforts to promote Health equity and Environmental Stewardship for all residents. The County continues to pursue an equitable, sustainable response to the Tijuana River Valley sewage crisis that safeguards our communities’ health, protects natural resources, and fosters a more resilient and prosperous region for current and future generations.

Respectfully submitted,



Terra Lawson-Remer
Supervisor, Third District



Paloma Aguirre
Supervisor, First District

Attachment(s)

N/A