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Editorial: Well-planned Measure C will reduce wildfire risk



A firefighter sprays water on a leveled home as the Hillside Fire burns in San Bernardino, Calif., on Thursday, Oct. 31, 2019. Whipped by strong wind, the blaze destroyed multiple residences. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

By **MARIN IJ EDITORIAL BOARD** |

PUBLISHED: February 3, 2020 at 1:12 p.m. | UPDATED:
February 3, 2020 at 1:13 p.m.

For years, Marin firefighters have returned from the front lines of wildland fires that have taken lives and properties in other California communities and have warned it could happen here.

The recent deadly and destructive fires in the North Bay and in Paradise provide ample warning that they are right.

That's what Measure C on the March 3 ballot is all about.

Its purpose is to increase fire prevention and protection to save lives and homes across the county.

Voters, except those residing in the Tiburon Fire Protection District, are being asked to approve an annual parcel tax starting out at 10 cents per building square foot to raise money needed to provide that protection.

The average tax for a home — estimated to be 2,100 square feet — would be \$210 per year. There is an annual increase based on the local Consumer Price Index.

The measure is even endorsed by the Citizens of Sensible Taxpayers, a homegrown tax-weary activist group that rarely finds a tax they can embrace. The authors of tax measure responded to two of COST's concerns, that the tax has a 10-year sunset, at which time voters would decide whether to keep it on the books, and that instead of a flat per-lot parcel tax, the levy would be based on the size of the home or building.

Measure C has the backing of fire chiefs and fire agencies across the county, except for Tiburon, where the board decided it can take care of its own fire prevention and protection efforts.

Measure C will raise \$19.3 million per year to help pay for coordinated wildfire prevention measures; among them, early detection, public warning and alert systems, improving evacuation routes and creating defensible space around homes and neighborhoods.

Marin is fortunate to have such a strong cadre of well-trained firefighters who already work almost seamlessly as a countywide firefighting force.

But local fire officials say wildland fires are getting worse, fire seasons are longer and wind-whipped out-of-control blazes — long considered a threat in Southern California — are happening in Northern California, as well.

Marin County Fire Chief Jason Weber says Measure C is in response to public demands, heard loud and clear after the 2017 Santa Rosa fires and the devastating 2018 Paradise blaze, that “we do more.”

Measure C is a product of more than a year of public planning and collaboration. It recognizes that Marin, which was once covered with grassy hills and meadows, is now filled with homes and flammable trees, bushes and fencing.

“We’ve got a bull’s-eye on us,” Weber says.

Measure C creates a new regional agency, comprised of a small staff and overseen by a board of representatives from 17 Marin fire agencies that will meet and deliberate in public to steer tax funds toward the measure’s goals. Measure C gives the agency 10 years to prove itself.

The measure also includes programs for evaluating changes homeowners and businesses can make in their landscaping to bolster odds for their properties’ protection and to help slow the spread of fires. There will be a program to help property owners who need financial assistance.

The new agency’s performance will be reviewed annually by an independent citizens oversight panel. In addition, seniors 65 and over and with annual household incomes of less than \$90,000 can apply for exemptions.

Measure C's objective is not to build a new bureaucracy. Marin already has more than enough of those. Its goal is to provide effective prevention and protection measures to keep people and property safe from the kinds of wildfires we've seen create such devastation.

The IJ editorial board recommends a yes vote on the Measure C fire tax.

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