

**COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO  
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 28, 2026**

**MINUTE ORDER NO. 16**

**SUBJECT: UNLOCK RESERVE FUNDS TO PROVIDE AIR PURIFIERS FOR RESIDENTS SUFFERING FROM AIR POLLUTION IMPACTS CAUSED BY THE TIJUANA RIVER POLLUTION CRISIS (DISTRICTS: 1)**

**OVERVIEW**

The Tijuana River Valley pollution crisis is an ongoing, extraordinary public health crisis that continues to expose District 1 residents to contaminated air and water. Despite years of intergovernmental coordination and repeated analysis, residents remain unprotected and continue to face immediate and compounding harm. Families are living with chronic sewage exposure, repeated hydrogen sulfide events, prolonged beach and community closures, and daily disruptions to their quality of life. While responsibility for the source of pollution spans jurisdictions, the County's responsibility to protect its residents is clear, and at present, District 1 residents are not being adequately protected.

Recent studies from University of California, San Diego (UCSD) and San Diego State University (SDSU) have documented measurements of hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S) 4,500 times higher than typical urban levels. Public health studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in partnership with the County also indicate: 92% of survey respondents do not feel safe in the areas where they live; 64% experienced new or worsening physical symptoms, 65% of participants feel their mental health symptoms are related to the sewage crisis i; and 70% report disruptions in their social activity, sleep schedule, and more. ii

In 2024, due to increasing concerns about air pollution impacts on public health, the San Diego Air Pollution Control District (SDAPCD) created the Air Improvement Relief Effort (AIRE) program where residents affected by air pollution would receive one air purifier and two replacement filters.iii Residents living in the City of San Diego communities of Otay Mesa West, San Ysidro, Egger Highlands, and Nestor as well as the City of Imperial Beach are eligible for the program. However, in order to truly bring relief to suffering residents, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) recommends multiple air purifiers per residence.

The AIRE program has demonstrated clear benefits for community members. In December, the SDAPCD launched a survey with current participants. Respondents noted improved well-being including better sleep, less eye irritation, fewer headaches, improved breathing, less coughing and throat irritation, fewer allergies and asthma symptoms. 88% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the purifiers. 80% of respondents say the purifier reduced sewage-related odors in their homes and 86% said the application and delivery process was easy or very easy.iv

Continued funding is necessary to sustain and expand its impact. In December 2025, the SDAPCD Governing Board unanimously approved extending the program into 2026 and committed \$1 million in bridge funding. With additional investment, the program can expand from one to three air purifiers per household, consistent with CDPH guidance to reduce indoor H<sub>2</sub>S exposure. Elevated H<sub>2</sub>S levels are linked to odors and symptoms such as headaches, nausea, and respiratory distress. v Expanding the AIRE program will improve indoor air quality and provide critical relief to affected residents.

Using unlocked reserve funds to expand AIRE aligns with the County's responsibility to protect public health during emergencies and prolonged pollution events. Air purifiers provide proven, immediate reductions in indoor pollutants and address urgent health needs that cannot wait for a future budget cycle. Ongoing sewage spills, infrastructure failures, and heavy rainfall continue to create acute risks for South Bay communities already facing disproportionate environmental pollution impacts. Acting now prevents further inequities and reinforces the County's commitment to equitable public health protection.

Until long-delayed infrastructure upgrades in both the United States and Mexico are completed, South Bay communities will remain exposed to airborne pollution. Supplying impacted households with air purifiers demonstrates responsive leadership and a commitment to safeguarding public health. Breathable air is a fundamental human right and the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors must continue taking decisive short-term actions to protect public health while advancing long-term solutions to permanently resolve the Tijuana River pollution crisis.

## **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

### **SUPERVISOR PALOMA AGUIRRE**

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to add the AIRE program to the Unlocked Reserves framework in an amount of \$4,000,000.
2. Direct the CAO to negotiate a Memorandum of Agreement (Agreement) providing \$4,000,000 to the San Diego Air Pollution Control District (SDAPCD) for expansion of its air purifier distribution program in the Tijuana River Valley, known as the Air Improvement Relief Effort (AIRE).

## **EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

People living near the Tijuana River Valley face ongoing exposure to polluted air and environmental hazards. These impacts fall most heavily on communities of color and neighborhoods with fewer economic resources compared to other parts of the region. This item directs the County to continue advocacy and leadership that will help collect the data to press forward on immediate solutions.

## **SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT**

This board letter aligns with the County's sustainability goals to protect the environment and promote our natural resources, diverse habitats, and cultivate a natural environment for residents, visitors, and future generations to enjoy. It also aligns with County Sustainability goals, including: (4): Protect the health and wellbeing of everyone in the region, with a focus on collaborating with community partners and advocating for environmental justice for communities that have been disproportionately impacted (5): Protect water in all forms. (7): Reduce pollution.

## **FISCAL IMPACT**

Funds for this request are not included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan. If approved, this request will be included in the Unlocked Reserves Framework which will result in one-time cost of \$4.0 million in Fiscal Year 2025-26 for the agreement with the Air Pollution Control District for AIRE program expansion. The funding source is prior year Unrestricted General Fund Balance made available as unlocked reserves. There will be no additional staff years.

## **BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT**

The impact of beach closures has a devastating impact on coastal communities through decreased visitors and street traffic. The long-term health impact of chronic exposure to transboundary pollutants and chemicals may also impact economic growth and flourishing of communities across San Diego County.

### **ACTION:**

ON MOTION of Supervisor Aguirre, seconded by Supervisor Montgomery Steppe, the Board of Supervisors took the following actions:

1. Directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to add the AIRE program to the Unlocked Reserves framework in an amount of \$4,000,000.
2. Directed the CAO to negotiate a Memorandum of Agreement (Agreement) providing \$4,000,000 to the San Diego Air Pollution Control District (SDAPCD) for expansion of its air purifier distribution program in the Tijuana River Valley, known as the Air Improvement Relief Effort (AIRE).
3. Directed the Chief Administrative Office to send a letter to the EPA and the IBWC expressing the County's support for the MOU and Minute Orders 330 and 333.

AYES: Aguirre, Lawson-Remer, Montgomery Steppe, Desmond

ABSENT: Anderson

State of California)

County of San Diego) §

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a full, true and correct copy of the Original entered in the Minutes of the Board of Supervisors.

ANDREW POTTER  
Clerk of the Board of Supervisors



**Signed**

by Andrew Potter