



**PALOMA AGUIRRE**  
SUPERVISOR, FIRST DISTRICT  
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

**AGENDA ITEM**

**DATE:** January 28, 2026

**16**

**TO:** Board of Supervisors

**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 <sup>i</sup>; and 70% report disruptions in their social activity, sleep schedule, and more. <sup>ii</sup>

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.<sup>iii</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>iv</sup>

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.<sup>v</sup> 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

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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.

### **ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT**

N/A

### **BACKGROUND**

The Tijuana River Valley pollution crisis has had profound environmental, economic, and public health impacts across multiple communities in South San Diego County including Imperial Beach, San Ysidro, and south San Diego with over 200 billion gallons of raw sewage and industrial waste crossing the border since 2018. This immense, unrelenting pollution has forced South County beaches to close for over 1,400 consecutive days. The County of San Diego Board of Supervisors initially declared the pollution crisis a 'state of emergency' in 2023 and has reaffirmed that declaration 20 times. Advocacy on the Tijuana River Valley will remain a priority until this crisis is fully addressed.

The pollution crisis is no longer just an environmental problem; it is also a public health crisis. Sewage and industrial waste in the Tijuana River release noxious gases, including H<sub>2</sub>S into the air. Researchers from UCSD and SDSU have documented large amounts of H<sub>2</sub>S in air samples. In measurements near the river's turbulent sections, researchers observed H<sub>2</sub>S concentrations peaking at thousands of parts per billion. These H<sub>2</sub>S measurements are 4,500 times higher than typical urban levels. Scientists have also identified hundreds of additional gases associated with sewage and industrial pollution that contribute to poor air quality.<sup>vi</sup> These findings validate long-

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standing community reports of foul odors and health symptoms like headaches, respiratory distress, and irritation to the eyes, nose, and throat.

Moreover, UCSD researchers have found that pollutants from sewage are entering the air not only as gases but also through 'sea spray,' where wastewater contaminants become airborne near the river's ocean outflow. These airborne particles carry a mix of chemicals, including substances from illicit drugs, personal care products, and tire wear, indicating broader air quality impacts beyond what residents can smell.<sup>vii</sup> Together, the UCSD and SDSU findings demonstrate a direct pathway from contaminated river water to air pollution exposure, highlighting the regional scale of impacts and reinforcing calls for distributing air purifiers to protect public health in the Tijuana River Valley and adjacent San Diego communities.

Recent public health studies from the CDC reflect the impacts on south bay residents living adjacent to the Tijuana River Valley. The Assessment of Chemical Exposure (ACE) study included 2,100 residents and reported the following:

- 92% of residents do not feel safe in the areas where they live, work, and recreate
- 64% reported at least one new or worsening physical health symptom which they attributed to the pollution crisis
- 31% sought out medical care because of symptoms
- 28% reported symptoms of anxiety
- 21% reported symptoms of depression
- 65% of participants feel their mental health symptoms are related to the sewage crisis<sup>viii</sup>

The Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER) involved 189 households in Imperial Beach, Nestor, and San Ysidro, where residents describe daily headaches, nausea, and persistent coughs. The study reported the following:

- 77% believe the quality of the air in the area is not okay
- 63% report at least one sign of emotional distress
- 65% report taking extra steps to avoid certain areas of their own neighborhood
- 70% report disruptions in their household life including exercise, social activity, sleep and more<sup>ix</sup>

In 2024, due to increasing concerns about air pollution impacts on public health, the SDAPCD created the AIRE program where residents impacted by air pollution would receive an air purifier and two replacement filters. 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. These air purifiers include High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters with activated carbon, and potassium permanganate, a chemical compound that acts as an oxidizing agent to remove hydrogen sulfide. To date, air purifiers have been distributed to 10,000 households.<sup>x</sup> The demand for additional purifiers is significant with hundreds of people recently added to a rapidly growing wait list.

In December 2025, the SDAPCD conducted a survey of residents who have been using the purifiers. The survey results indicate the program is highly successful including the following feedback from residents:

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- 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.
- 8 in 10 respondents say the purifier reduced sewage-related odors in their homes.
- 86% said the application and delivery process was easy or very easy.
- Over half of respondents used the purifiers for more than 9 hours a day.
- 88% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the purifiers. <sup>xi</sup>

In order to build off the success of the AIRE program continued funding is needed to sustain and expand the AIRE program and protect public health. In December, the SDAPCD Governing Board unanimously voted to continue the program into 2026 and committed \$1 million in bridge funding. With additional investment, the program could increase from one to three air purifier per household, in alignment with CDPH recommendations to effectively minimize indoor H<sub>2</sub>S levels. At concentrations of 5–30 parts per billion (ppb), H<sub>2</sub>S can cause noticeable odors and symptoms such as headaches, nausea, and breathing discomfort, particularly for sensitive individuals. Below 5 ppb, most people do not experience odor or related symptoms.<sup>xii</sup> Additionally, the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment sets a chronic exposure limit of 8 ppb.<sup>xiii</sup> Enhancing the AIRE program would significantly improve indoor air quality and provide critical relief to impacted residents.

Using unlocked reserve funds to expand the AIRE program is consistent with the County's duty to protect public health during emergencies and sustained pollution events. Air purifiers are proven to reduce harmful particulate matter indoors, offering immediate relief in resident's homes. This action directly responds to urgent and unforeseen public health needs that cannot wait for a future budget cycle. The ongoing pollution crisis, compounded by wastewater infrastructure failures and heavy rainfall, creates immediate health risks that demand timely intervention. Any delay will worsen existing health inequities and contradict the County's stated commitments to equity. By focusing attention where health risks are greatest, the County affirms its responsibility to protect public health and to guarantee that all communities, regardless of income or demographics, have access to clean air and water.

Until U.S. and Mexico infrastructure upgrades are finalized, South Bay communities will continue to be exposed to untreated sewage and industrial waste that is airborne and pollutes their homes. Using reserve funds to supply impacted residents with air purifiers demonstrates responsive leadership and commitment to safeguarding public health. Breathable air is a fundamental human right and the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors must remain steadfast in taking actions to protect public health in the short-term as we continue to pursue sustained long-term solutions that address the root causes of the Tijuana River pollution crisis.

## **LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN**

Today's proposed actions support Sustainability and Equity initiatives in the County's 2026-31 Strategic Plan by combatting environmental justice, health, and economic issues resulting from the long-standing transboundary pollution.

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Respectfully submitted,



PALOMA AGUIRRE  
Supervisor, First District

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

N/A

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- [i] Tijuana River Valley Sewage Emergency Assessment of Chemical Exposure Results [CDC Presentation](#)
- [ii] Community Health Survey, October 2024 Tijuana River Valley & Beach Water Sewage Crisis [CDC CASPER Study](#)
- [iii] Air Improvement Relief Effort [Program](#)
- [iv] San Diego Air Pollution Control District AIRE Program [Survey](#)
- [v] California Department of Public Health guidance for [2026 AIRE Program Feasibility Assessment](#)
- [vi] UC San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC Riverside, San Diego State University (SDSU) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) [Tijuana River's Toxic Water Pollutes the Air](#)
- [vii] Contaminated Tijuana River Contributes to Regional Particulate Matter (PM) Levels Highlighting Overlooked Water–Air Transfer of Gaseous PM Precursors [ACS Publications](#)
- [viii] Tijuana River Valley Sewage Emergency Assessment of Chemical Exposure Results [CDC Presentation](#)
- [ix] Community Health Survey, October 2024 Tijuana River Valley & Beach Water Sewage Crisis [CDC CASPER Study](#)
- [x] Air Improvement Relief Effort [Program](#)
- [xi] San Diego Air Pollution Control District AIRE Program [Survey](#)
- [xii] California Department of Public Health guidance for [2026 AIRE Program Feasibility Assessment](#)
- [xiii] California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment [OEHHA](#)