



PALOMA AGUIRRE

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

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: September 9, 2025

17

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**ENHANCING REGIONAL EFFORTS AND FEDERAL ADVOCACY TO ADVANCE
SOLUTIONS TO THE TIJUANA RIVER SEWAGE CRISIS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

The Tijuana River sewage crisis has had profound impacts across multiple shorelines and surrounding communities in our region for decades, especially the communities of Imperial Beach, San Ysidro, southern San Diego, and Coronado. The coastal waters of numerous San Diego County Beaches and the Tijuana River Valley have been contaminated by continuous flows containing raw sewage and industrial waste from the Tijuana River. On July 22, 2025 (4) the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors (Board) renewed its proclamation for the existence of a county-wide local emergency due to the Tijuana River sewage crisis for the 17th consecutive time. Ultimately, this is an issue of systemic neglect that has persisted due to chronic failures and inadequate capacity of wastewater infrastructure on both sides of the United States-Mexico border. Since December 2022, the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) has recorded over 89 billion gallons of toxic sewage-laden water crossing the border into the United States. Imperial Beach has been closed for over 1,300 consecutive days, representing one of the longest and most severe beach closure runs in the history of the United States. This ongoing crisis threatens public health, marine ecosystems, the local economy, and recreational opportunity for tens of thousands of people living in South Bay. This crisis is resulting in lasting negative health impacts to children and families and serious economic harm, impacting small businesses and the workers who rely on these jobs for their livelihood. This issue can no longer be ignored or treated as a nuisance to be swept away or kicked down the road. This is a full-scale public health and environmental emergency demanding immediate, sustained binational action from all levels of government.

Impacted communities in District 1 cannot be clearer in expressing their ongoing suffering and concerns regarding the health of their families and community. Recent studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including the Community Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response (CASPER) and the Assessment of Chemical Exposure (ACE),

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TO ADVANCE SOLUTIONS TO THE TIJUANA RIVER SEWAGE
CRISIS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

provide documentation of the growing health and safety risks faced by those who live and work in communities adjacent to the Tijuana River Valley

The ACE study was conducted by the CDC's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) between October 21 and November 22, 2024. ACE offered a platform for nearly 2,100 community members to share their lived experiences with Tijuana River Valley pollution. The findings were alarming with 97% of survey respondents expressing concern about air quality and 96% concerned about beach water quality. 92% of respondents reported they do not feel safe in the areas where they live, work, or visit. 64% of respondents reported new or worsening physical symptoms they attributed to the sewage crisis in the past 30 days with the most common being headache, runny nose, congestion, and respiratory symptoms such as coughing and difficulty breathing. All of these symptoms are consistent with symptoms related to hydrogen sulfide exposure. 28% of participants reported symptoms of anxiety and 21% reported symptoms of depression. Notably, the rates of mental health symptoms were higher among those reporting severe sewage smell and a staggering 65% of participants felt their mental health symptoms were related to the sewage crisis.

The CASPER survey included approximately 190 in-person interviews, proportionately representing nearly 41,000 households across the region. The results of the CASPER also paint a deeply concerning picture. 81% of respondents expressed the health of their household was their top concern and 65% reported taking extra steps to avoid areas of their own neighborhood. Nearly half of respondents reported experiencing at least one health symptom such as headaches, nausea, respiratory problems, or gastrointestinal distress which they believe to be connected to sewage exposure. Over 80% of households expressed concern for the health of a family member and 70% reported disruptions in their life including exercise, social activity, and sleep; some of the most fundamental behaviors involved in establishing and sustaining a healthy lifestyle. The people of South Bay who live in these impacted communities deserve the same opportunities to engage in social and physical activity and to get quality sleep as anyone else in San Diego County. This further illustrates the need for immediate actions to optimally understand and address the sewage crisis.

On June 24, 2025 (10) the Board directed the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to begin conducting a feasibility assessment for a long-term Epidemiological Public Health Impact Study as well as a robust Economic Impact Study related to impacts of the sewage crisis with a return back to the Board on September 30, 2025. The time for implementation of these studies is now. Today's item directs the CAO to immediately begin implementation of both of these studies so the County can better understand the broad health and economic impacts to affected communities. With this additional data, the Board will be optimally positioned to advocate for future resources to protect our residents and economy and pursue bold actions that will bring an end to this public health and environmental crisis.

SUBJECT: ENHANCING REGIONAL EFFORTS AND FEDERAL ADVOCACY TO ADVANCE SOLUTIONS TO THE TIJUANA RIVER SEWAGE CRISIS (DISTRICTS: ALL)

Saturn Boulevard in South San Diego is a documented hot spot for pollution and noxious chemicals from the Tijuana River. At the hot spot there is a large foam pit which can be seen from satellite images (see image). The turbulent flow at Saturn Boulevard is caused by the channel's drop structure and constricted design. As contaminated river water flows over this drop and collides with obstacles in the channel below, it churns violently, mixing air into the water. This agitation releases dissolved gases, including hydrogen sulfide, into the air. Researchers from UC San Diego and San Diego State University have conducted sampling at the Saturn Blvd site and found hydrogen sulfide readings that exceed occupational safety standards. The San Diego Air Pollution Control District has also recorded multiple exceedances of California's health-based thresholds in the area.



Aerial view of the Tijuana River sewage hotspot on Saturn Blvd located in the City of San Diego. This area has been linked to toxic gas emissions, including hydrogen sulfide, posing environmental and public health concerns for the surrounding neighborhoods

Critical infrastructure upgrades are needed at Saturn Blvd in order to eliminate river turbulence that is contributing to the aerosolization of hydrogen sulfide. Today's item directs the CAO to fund a feasibility study for infrastructure projects at Saturn Blvd to mitigate aerosolization of hydrogen sulfide and other potential harmful compounds. Through these infrastructure upgrades, the County can protect the health and well-being of nearby residents and marine ecosystem.

The scope and scale that is required to bring full resolution to the Tijuana River sewage crisis exceed the County's jurisdiction and resources, making federal engagement and leadership essential to advancing permanent solutions. Aggressive advocacy at the Federal level is critical moving forward as root-cause solutions to the crisis require binational cooperation and significant infrastructure projects that only the federal government can negotiate and fund. While the County will continue to work tirelessly to address local impacts, the federal government has the diplomatic

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leverage to work with Mexico, direct agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the International Boundary and Water Commission, and secure the substantial funding needed for diversion of the Tijuana River, wastewater treatment infrastructure upgrades, and long-term maintenance and monitoring. This advocacy includes but is not limited to educating legislators outside of our delegation who are not familiar with our region and building coalitions across the nation to advocate for programs that will improve the quality of life for our residents. By advocating aggressively in Washington, the County ensures that the lived struggles of border communities are heard at the highest levels. Such actions will position the San Diego region to receive the federal investments necessary to protect public health, restore coastal waters, and safeguard the regional economy.

Today's item directs the CAO to immediately begin implementation of an epidemiological public health impact study on chronic hydrogen sulfide exposure to impacted communities, an Economic Impact Study to assess the full scope of losses caused by the sewage crisis — including impacts to small businesses, property values, and regional tourism — to strengthen future funding and mitigation efforts, and to fund a feasibility study for infrastructure projects at Saturn Blvd to mitigate aerosolization of hydrogen sulfide and other potential harmful compounds. Lastly, today's item directs the CAO to competitively procure federal advocacy services to advance solutions to the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis on behalf of the County of San Diego.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

SUPERVISOR PALOMA AGUIRRE

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to implement an epidemiological public health impact study in impacted communities.
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to fund and implement an Economic Impact Study assessing the full scope of losses caused by the sewage crisis — including impacts to small businesses, property values, and regional tourism — to strengthen future funding and mitigation efforts.
3. Cancel appropriations of \$270,000 and associated Operating Transfers In from the General Fund in the Capital Outlay Fund for Capital Project 1025569 Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Active Recreation and Community Park; *and* transfer appropriations of \$270,000 from the Contribution to Capital Outlay Fund, Operating Transfers Out to the Department of Parks and Recreation, Services & Supplies, to provide funding for a feasibility study based on the transfer from Capital Project 1025569 Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Active Recreation and Community Park to fund a feasibility study for infrastructure projects at Saturn Blvd to mitigate aerosolization of hydrogen sulfide and other potential harmful compounds. **(4 VOTES)**
4. In accordance with Section 401, Article XXIII of the County Administrative Code, authorize the Director, Department of Purchasing and Contracting, to competitively procure federal advocacy services focused on the Tijuana River Valley, and upon

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successful negotiation and determination of fair and reasonable price, award a contract for an initial term of one (1) year, with five (5) one-year option periods and up to an additional six (6) months if needed, and to amend the contract as needed to reflect changes in services and funding.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Residents living in communities near the Tijuana River Valley continue to endure repeated exposure to polluted air and environmental dangers. Affected communities are largely communities of color and of lower socioeconomic status than other zip codes throughout the region. This item directs resources towards comprehensive analyses of harms to local residents and small businesses from the sewage crisis while continuing to advance the region toward permanent solutions. By concentrating efforts in the areas where health impacts are most severe, the County is demonstrating an equitable commitment to safeguarding public health and ensuring that every community, no matter its socioeconomic demographics, has the right to clean air and water.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

With the adoption of these recommendations, the County of San Diego will support Sustainability Goal #4 to protect the health and well-being of everyone in the region. These actions will improve water and air quality for impacted communities throughout the County allowing individuals and families to live healthier lives with enhanced economic opportunities.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for developing options to conduct an epidemiological public health impact study in Recommendation 1 are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in the Health and Human Services Agency. The actual costs of conducting the study will depend on the study type selected. There are various study types being analyzed that could range in cost from \$500,000 to \$6,000,000. Options will be presented to the Ad Hoc Subcommittee for consideration and input. Depending on the option selected, staff will explore what resources may be available and will return to the Board for any necessary appropriations and/or options to reallocate existing General Purpose Revenue as needed.

Funds for the actions requested in Recommendation 2 to implement an Economic Impact Study are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in the Finance & General Government Executive Office, previously planned for a personnel costing software implementation project. The software implementation project had no plans of moving forward prior to this action. If approved, this request will result in estimated costs of \$250,000 in Fiscal Year 2025-26 based on General Purpose Revenue.

Funds for the actions requested in Recommendation 3 to fund a feasibility study for infrastructure projects at Saturn Blvd are partially included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). If approved, this request will result in costs of \$270,000 in Fiscal Year 2025-26 based on transfer of funds from Capital Project 1025569 Tijuana

SUBJECT: ENHANCING REGIONAL EFFORTS AND FEDERAL ADVOCACY TO ADVANCE SOLUTIONS TO THE TIJUANA RIVER SEWAGE CRISIS (DISTRICTS: ALL)

River Valley Regional Park Active Recreation and Community Park to DPR Services & Supplies. Future year costs are unknown at this time as it will be determined in the feasibility study, and will be included in future years Operational Plans based on available funding sources.

Funds for the actions requested in Recommendation 4 to procure advocacy services are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in the Chief Administrative Office - Economic Development and Government Affairs (EDGA), based on existing funding that will be repurposed currently planned for Salaries & Benefits supporting an existing staff position which is vacant. Continued vacancy of this position will result in a reduction in support service levels for Arts & Culture efforts within EDGA, until the position can be funded and filled. If approved, this request will result in costs of up \$130,000 in Fiscal Year 2025-26 based on existing General Purpose Revenue. Future years annual costs will be included in future Operational Plans based on available funding sources.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

Frequent beach closures and sewage contamination directly harm local businesses and economic development by reducing tourism, limiting customers for local businesses, and cutting off recreational opportunities for tens of thousands of South Bay residents. Addressing the Tijuana River Valley sewage crisis would eliminate these harms.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

The Tijuana River sewage crisis has had profound impacts across multiple shorelines and surrounding communities in our region for decades, especially the communities of Imperial Beach, San Ysidro, southern San Diego, and Coronado. The coastal waters of numerous San Diego County Beaches and the Tijuana River Valley have been contaminated by continuous flows containing raw sewage and industrial waste from the Tijuana River. On July 22, 2025 (4) the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors (Board) renewed its proclamation for the existence of a county-wide local emergency due to the Tijuana River sewage crisis for the 17th consecutive time. Ultimately, this is an issue of systemic neglect that has persisted due to chronic failures and inadequate capacity of wastewater infrastructure on both sides of the United States-Mexico border. Since December 2022, the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) has recorded over 89 billion gallons of toxic sewage-laden water crossing the border into the United States. Imperial Beach has been closed for over 1,300 consecutive days, representing one of the longest and most severe beach closure runs in the history of the United States. This ongoing crisis threatens public health, marine ecosystems, the local economy, and recreational opportunity for tens of thousands of people living in South Bay. This crisis is resulting in lasting negative health impacts to children and families and serious economic harm, impacting small businesses and the workers who rely on these jobs for their livelihood. This issue can no longer be ignored or treated as a nuisance to be

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CRISIS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

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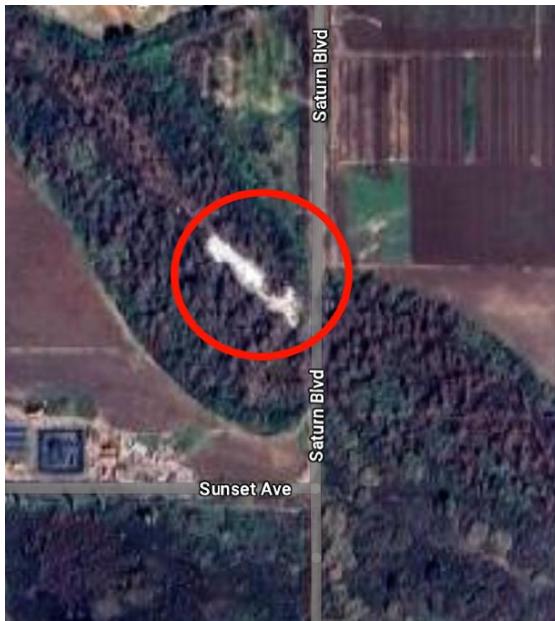
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LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action supports the County of San Diego's 2025–2030 Strategic Plan Initiatives of Equity (Health), Community (Quality of Life), and Justice (Environmental) by advancing initiatives that will improve water quality, air quality, public health, and environmental sustainability for impacted communities.

Respectfully submitted,



PALOMA AGUIRRE
Supervisor, First District

**SUBJECT: ENHANCING REGIONAL EFFORTS AND FEDERAL ADVOCACY
TO ADVANCE SOLUTIONS TO THE TIJUANA RIVER SEWAGE
CRISIS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

ATTACHMENT(S)

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