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Tijuana River Sewage Crisis Funding Allocation Analysis

An analysis of how an estimated $80 million in annual revenue from a half-cent sales tax could be allocated to District 1 projects.

June 2026

This document is informational. It does not advocate for or against any ballot measure and does not state the position of the Board of Supervisors.

Executive Summary

This analysis was prepared in response to recurring questions from constituents, community members, and members of the news media about how revenue from a proposed half-cent sales tax could be applied to the Tijuana River sewage crisis in District 1. It examines one way the County of San Diego could allocate an estimated $80 million in annual revenue across the components eligible for County-funded mitigation or within County influence, subject to federal, binational, and permitting constraints.

The analysis is conditional and illustrative. It assumes, for analytical purposes, that such a revenue stream becomes available, and it evaluates how those funds could be structured and deployed. It does not advocate for or against the underlying measure, does not state the position of the Board of Supervisors, and is not a technical engineering design. Any expenditure would require approval by the Board of Supervisors, and project costs would be validated through the County's standard capital process before any bonds are issued.

Principal findings.

- Published data indicate that federal and Mexican investments now underway address a substantial share, but not all, of the wastewater volume generated in the Tijuana watershed, leaving a residual flow that continues to reach the river under both dry-weather and wet-weather conditions. These conditions are anticipated to continue well into the future as the population is expected to grow by 40% by 2040 and currently 75% of Tijuana's collection system is in disrepair. [1]
- A recurring revenue stream of approximately $80 million per year could be organized into two functional pools consistent with standard public-finance practice: roughly 61 percent pledged or reserved for capital financing, including debt-service coverage, and roughly 39 percent for recurring operating costs that are not appropriate to bond. [2]
- At a conservative 1.5 times debt-service coverage ratio, approximately $49 million per year of pledged revenue would support about $32.7 million in annual debt service and an estimated $475 million to $520 million in one-time capital proceeds, subject to interest rates, reserves, issuance costs, and final structuring.
- The allocation modeled here requires legal and fiscal review to demonstrate compliance with the spending categories and limits defined in the measure's expenditure plan. [3]
- All figures are planning-level estimates. Realized outputs depend on feasibility studies, engineering design, market conditions at issuance, and factors outside County control, including Mexican-side flows and major storm events.
- Position the region to invest local resources that attract and amplify federal funding opportunities.

1. Objective and Scope

The objective of this analysis is to answer a specific question: if an estimated $80 million per year in transactions-and-use-tax revenue were available, how could it be allocated against the

portion of the Tijuana River problem that the County can influence or mitigate with local funds, and what outputs could reasonably be expected from that allocation?

In scope: characterization of the problem from published data; analysis of the residual gap left by funded federal and Mexican infrastructure; a capital-versus-operating allocation structure; a capital-financing options analysis; mapping of the allocation to the measure's spending categories; and the associated governance and oversight structure.

Out of scope: engineering design and validated project costs, which are produced through the County's standard capital process; programs funded under other categories of the measure; and any recommendation to voters. Nothing in this analysis constitutes advocacy for or against the measure or a statement of the Board's position.

2. Methodology and Key Assumptions

The analysis draws on published flow data from the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) [4]; a 2026 binational framework report authored by the former IBWC Commissioner and a former Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) border-infrastructure official [1]; federal capacity figures from the U.S. EPA and USIBWC [9]; public-finance principles published by the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) [2]; and the measure's filed expenditure plan [3].

The approach is as follows: characterize the problem and quantify the residual gap from published data; apply standard public-finance principles to separate one-time capital from recurring operating costs; size an illustrative bond capacity under a conservative coverage assumption; map the resulting allocation to the categories and limits in the measure; and identify the governance structure required for special revenue.

Key assumptions: annual revenue of approximately $80 million; a 30-year bond term; an interest-rate range of 4.5 to 5 percent; a 1.5 times debt-service coverage ratio for sizing, treating the $49 million capital amount as pledged revenue rather than actual debt service; and population and flow generation projections drawn from the cited binational report. These assumptions are stated so that figures can be tested and revised as better data becomes available.

3. Problem Characterization

For decades, untreated sewage, polluted runoff, sediment, and trash have crossed the U.S. border through the Tijuana River and its canyon tributaries, moving through District 1 communities and emptying into the ocean near Imperial Beach. Since 2018, the USIBWC main-channel river gage has measured over 200 billion gallons of transboundary flows. [4]

The flows pollute both water and air. Hydrogen sulfide gas aerosolized from transboundary flows at a river hot spot have been measured at levels far above the state air quality standard, and County health surveys document widespread odor exposure and reported health symptoms in the affected communities. Beach closures along the southern San Diego County coast have been frequent. [5][6][7]

4. Funding Gap Analysis

The federal government and Mexico have committed funding to expand the South Bay International Wastewater Treatment Plant and to improve infrastructure on the Mexican side. These investments are central to any solution. To date, the federal government has directed a substantial investment to this infrastructure: Congress secured $300 million through the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement for the expansion and upgrade of the South Bay plant, and federal officials have placed total U.S. investment in the effort at more than $650 million. In August 2025, the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission completed an expansion of the plant from 25 to 35 million gallons per day, and the EPA and the Commission are advancing a further expansion toward 50 million gallons per day, targeted for completion by the end of 2027. In December 2025, the United States and Mexico signed Minute 333, committing both governments to additional infrastructure, monitoring, and long-term operations and maintenance. [8] The analytical question is what volume of flow remains after they are complete. [9]

Published figures indicate the following. Tijuana generates roughly 67 million gallons of measured wastewater per day; an additional 10% of wastewater reaches the river outside formal collection systems, making the effective wastewater total approximately 74 million gallons per day. Even during dry weather, roughly 20 MGD bypasses treatment. Total generation is projected to rise toward 102 MGD by 2050 as the population grows by about 40 percent toward 2.4 million people. The South Bay plant expansion raises U.S.-side capacity to 50 MGD on average, with a 75 MGD peak. In wet weather, transboundary flows average about 109 MGD, which exceeds even the plant's 75 MGD peak capacity by more than 34 MGD. [1] [11]

Taken together, these figures indicate a residual volume that currently funded federal and Mexican infrastructure is not sized to be captured reliably

Tijuana wastewater system	Volume (MGD)	Effect on the river
Generated today (with ~10% not connected to the system)	~67 to 73	Source volume
Generated by 2050 (projected, ~40% growth)	~102	Source volume
Bypassing treatment today, dry weather	~20	Reaches river and ocean now
South Bay plant capacity after full expansion	50 avg (75 peak)	Removes flow
Other transboundary flows (storm events, wastewater system collapses, infrastructure failures, and other contaminated discharges	100+	Exceeds available capacity

A local revenue stream could be applied to this residual: capturing and treating flow that still crosses the border, addressing air and water quality impacts during the construction period, controlling sediment and trash, and contributing to watershed restoration. The remainder of this analysis examines how $80 million per year could be allocated across those functions.

5. Allocation Framework

The allocation separates spending into two functional pools. The first services debt on one-time capital construction. The second funds recurring annual costs that are not appropriate to bond. This separation is consistent with GFOA capital-planning and structural-balance guidance: funding strategies should be linked to asset useful life, and recurring expenditures should be supported by recurring revenues. [2]

The percentages below are planning targets. Actual annual allocations would be set by the Board of Supervisors through the budget process and adjusted as the program matures.

Spending category	Share	Approx. annual	What it funds
BUCKET A · DEBT SERVICE (services bonds that fund one-time capital construction)			
Capital pledge for bond debt-service coverage	~61%	~$49M / yr	Pledges revenue that can support bond debt service and coverage, converting annual revenue into approximately $475 million to $520 million in one-time proceeds to build a system to capture and treat sewage and industrial waste.
BUCKET B · ANNUAL PAY-AS-YOU-GO (recurring costs that are not bonded)			
Community air quality and public health	~10%	~$8M / yr	Indoor air protection programs, improving schools and community facilities, public health monitoring, and a real-time public air and water quality dashboard.
Operations, maintenance, and program delivery	~18.5%	~$14.8M / yr	Operation and maintenance of the bonded infrastructure as it comes online, program management, monitoring, and reporting. Reserved annually before debt service.
Sediment, trash, and stormwater (operating share)	~6%	~$5M / yr	Recurring dredging and trash removal at priority sites, including canyon tributaries where wet-weather sediment and trash are heaviest. One-time capital structures are funded from Bucket A.
Habitat and estuary restoration	~2.5%	~$2M / yr	Local match and sustaining funds for restoration of the Tijuana River Estuary and adjacent wetlands, paired with larger state and federal grants where available.
Independent oversight and audit	up to 1.5%	up to $1.2M / yr	Citizen oversight committee, annual independent fiscal and performance audit, and public reporting, subject to the measure's 1.5 percent administrative cap.

Spending category	Share	Approx. annual	What it funds
TOTAL	**100%**	**~$80M / yr**	About 61% services one-time capital bonds; about 39% funds recurring annual programs and operations, reserved before debt service.

6. Capital Financing Options

The central financing question is how to fund one-time capital: the capture-and-treatment infrastructure, the conveyance to treatment, and the permanent sediment and trash structures. Two approaches are available. Bond financing converts a steady annual payment into a large sum available immediately, allowing construction to proceed and the cost to be repaid over the life of the asset. Pay-as-you-go financing accumulates cash over time and defers construction until funds are on hand. For long-lived infrastructure, GFOA guidance supports debt policies that link debt terms to asset useful life and long-term capital planning. [2]

Modeled against approximately $49 million per year of pledged capital revenue (about 61 percent of revenue), the resulting one-time proceeds depend on the coverage assumption, as shown below. The analysis sizes the capital program against the conservative, coverage-adjusted figure. Final figures would be set with County finance staff and bond counsel based on the structure and market conditions at issuance.

Scenario	One-time proceeds	Assumptions
Gross pledge	~$710M to $750M	$49M annual debt service, 30-year term, 4.5 to 5% interest, no coverage adjustment.
With 1.5x coverage (prudent)	~$475M to $520M	Same rate and term, treating $49M as pledged revenue and dividing by a 1.5x coverage ratio to size annual debt service. This is the figure used for sizing.
PLANNING RANGE USED	**~$475M to $520M**	Final figures are set with County finance and bond counsel at issuance.

Recurring costs are treated differently. Operations and maintenance, community air quality and health programs, annual dredging, habitat restoration, and independent oversight are ongoing obligations for the life of the program. Bonding them would mean borrowing to pay operating bills, which is neither prudent nor permitted. These costs are funded year to year from the remaining 39 percent of revenue. Operations and maintenance of the bonded infrastructure are reserved within the recurring pay-as-you-go pool before any excess is considered for capital.

7. Spending Categories and Expected Outputs

This section describes the function funded in each category and an output that could be measured to assess performance. Engineering details and validated designs are produced through the County's standard capital process; what follows is the analytical approach, not a committed design, and the outputs are projected rather than guaranteed.

The problem has four interlocking components: the flows that cross the border, the air quality impacts they produce, the sediment and trash they carry, and the damage to the watershed. The allocation addresses each. The table states each component, the function funded, and an indicator that could be tracked.

Problem component	Funded function	Indicator that could be tracked
Flows crossing the border	Capture and convey main-channel flows at the border and construct treatment capacity to process flow, trash, sediment, and industrial contaminants where the federal system has no capture infrastructure.	Change in the number of transboundary flow days measured at the gage; volume captured and treated.
Air quality and hydrogen sulfide	Indoor air protection in affected homes, filtration in schools and community facilities, engineering controls at the worst odor hot spots, and continuous public monitoring.	Number of households and facilities covered; continuity of public monitoring; measured hydrogen sulfide levels relative to the safety standards.
Sediment and trash	Sediment basins and permanent trash-capture structures, plus the recurring dredging that keeps them functioning, to intercept material before it moves downstream.	Volume of sediment and trash intercepted; share of priority sites with active capture and maintenance.
Damaged watershed	Restoration of the Tijuana River Estuary and adjacent wetlands, using County funds as local match to draw larger state and federal restoration grants.	Acres of estuary and wetland under active restoration; matching grant dollars secured.

Capture and Treatment: Technical Basis

Today, the federal plant captures and treats flow from Tijuana's municipal collection system, together with dry-weather flows captured in canyon collectors at Goats Canyon, Smuggler's Gulch, Canyon del Sol, Silva Drain, and Stewart's Drain, and, depending on the PB-1 in Mexico, may also receive a portion of the dry-weather river flows diverted by a pump station called Planta de Bombeo de CILA. However, a substantial volume of untreated transboundary wastewater continues to cross the border, transporting sewage, suspended sediments, and solid waste through downstream communities before ultimately discharging significant pollution into the Pacific Ocean. [1][10] [11]

The federal plant is not sized for the full volume of sewage Tijuana generates, and it does not capture wet-weather river and canyon flows or the untreated waste from parts of eastern Tijuana where homes and businesses are not connected to any wastewater system. It is estimated that 10% of the population of Tijuana is not connected to a wastewater conveyance system. The flow in the river is also not ordinary municipal sewage: it carries trash, heavy sediment, and industrial chemicals, and cannot be pumped directly into a plant built to treat domestic sewage without fouling or damaging it. For that reason, the modeled infrastructure is designed to capture flow and contaminants at or near the border and convey them to full treatment, whether at the expanded federal plant or a new facility. [10]

The modeled infrastructure is sized to capture and treat the chronic flows that cross even in dry weather, on the order of 20 MGD, not the extreme storm peaks, which exceed any feasible local capacity and remain outside its scope. This is also what distinguishes the work from proposals to divert the entire river. In engineering terms, diversion means intercepting flow at or near the border and conveying it to treatment rather than letting it run down the channel to the ocean. The question is how much flow. Capturing and treating the dry-weather residual is a bounded and well-studied undertaking, and it is what this funding is sized to support. Capturing the full wet-weather flow, which exceeds 100 MGD during storms, is a far larger and more costly effort that the published record treats as a lower near-term priority and this plan does not fund it.

Whether treatment capacity is co-located with existing infrastructure or built as a separate facility is an engineering and agreement question to be resolved in design. Both paths perform the same function, and the choice would be made on the basis of feasibility, cost, and partner agreements.

Community Protection During Construction

Capture-and-treatment infrastructure is a multi-year construction effort. The allocation therefore funds community protection measures that can be deployed before the capital infrastructure is complete: indoor air protection in affected homes, filtration in schools, elderly care facilities, and community facilities, engineering controls at the worst odor hot spots, and continuous public air and water monitoring. These measures build on the County's existing air quality and health activities and are funded as a recurring annual investment rather than a one-time appropriation.

Sediment, Trash, and Watershed Restoration

Each storm carries contaminated sediment and trash across the border into the canyons, the estuary and the beaches. The allocation funds both the permanent structures that intercept this material, sediment basins and trash booms, and the recurring dredging and disposal that keeps them functioning. Over time, estuary and wetland restoration is intended to rebuild the watershed's capacity to filter and absorb what reaches it.

This analysis does not project that every beach would be open every day. The County does not control wet-weather storm flows or pollution originating on the Mexican side of the border, and during major storm events some flow would still cross untreated. The function funded here addresses the regular dry-weather flows that occur even without rain. The expected output is a measurable, sustained reduction in dry-weather flows reaching South Bay communities, with storm-driven, event-based flows remaining outside the scope of this funding.

8. Compliance with the Measure

The Protect San Diego County's Health and Safety Act sets legally binding limits on how revenue may be spent. The spending modeled in this analysis falls within the measure's Tijuana River environmental mitigation category, which permits up to 22.5 percent of total revenue and requires that at least 20 percent of total revenue go to infrastructure and engineering that stops sewage flows. Oversight and administration are held within the measure's 1.5 percent cap. [3]

Ballot measure category (Section 22.519)	Limit	How this allocation complies
Tijuana River environmental mitigation	up to 22.5%	All infrastructure, sediment, habitat, and related spending in this analysis falls within this category. The measure requires at least 20% of total revenue to go to infrastructure and engineering that stops sewage flows.
Healthcare, nutrition, children and families	up to 60%	Community public health programs tied to the sewage problem are funded within the environmental mitigation category. Broader County health and family programs are funded separately under this category and are outside the scope of this analysis.
Public safety, wildfire, and 911	17.5%	Outside the scope of this analysis. Funded separately under the measure.
Administration	max 1.5%	Oversight, audit, and reporting are held within this cap. Program management, and engineering costs are treated as project costs, consistent with standard capital program accounting.

9. Governance and Oversight

Special revenue of this kind is administered through an accountability structure defined by the measure and consistent with the County's standard practice. The structure has three elements: a citizen oversight committee that reviews spending and reports to the public; an independent fiscal and performance audit conducted and published each year; and validation of detailed project costs through the County's standard capital and procurement process, with engineering and design completed before any bonds are issued. Together these elements are intended to keep spending traceable and within the categories defined in the measure.

10. Implementation Sequencing

The work would be delivered in phases. Near-term phases stand up the program and begin engineering; later phases build and operate the permanent infrastructure. The sequence below is indicative and would be refined through the capital process.

Timeframe	Priorities
Year 1	Stand up the program and oversight committee. Deploy air quality protection to affected households. Fund a community health study. Develop an estuary restoration plan.
Years 2 to 3	Begin engineering design for capture and treatment capacity. Begin estuary restoration. Finalize agreements with federal partners for conveyance to full treatment.
Years 4 to 5	Construct permanent capture and treatment capacity. Complete sediment and trash programs. Scale community health and habitat programs to full operation.

Timeframe	Priorities
Years 6 to 10	Operate and maintain all County-funded infrastructure. Sustain community programs. Report annually to the Board of Supervisors and the public on flows, air quality, and spending.

11. Limitations and Key Assumptions

This analysis is subject to the following limitations, which should be read alongside its findings:

- The dollar figures, percentages, and proceeds ranges are planning-level estimates, not validated costs. They depend on feasibility studies, engineering design, and market conditions at the time of any bond issuance.
- The analysis is conditional. It assumes a revenue stream of approximately $80 million per year. The actual amount would vary with economic conditions and is not established here.
- Expected outputs are projected, not guaranteed. Realized results depend on design choices, partner agreements, and external factors, including Mexican-side flows and major storm events, that the County does not control.
- The analysis addresses pollution that crosses the border by land, through the Tijuana River and its canyon tributaries. It does not address wastewater discharged directly into the Pacific Ocean near Punta Bandera in Mexico, a separate source that affects local beaches but lies outside United States jurisdiction and County control.
- Any expenditure would require approval by the Board of Supervisors through the public budget process. This document does not commit the County to any project, allocation, or design.
- This document is informational. It does not advocate for or against any ballot measure and does not state the position of the Board of Supervisors.

Sources and References

[1] Liden, D., & Giner, M. E. (2026). *Tijuana River Contamination Crisis: A Five-Pillar Framework for Binational Solutions* (pp. 8, 10–20). San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. https://sdchamber.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Tijuana-River-Contamination-Crisis-Report SDRCC.pdf

**estimated wastewater flows 67-92 MGD, p.10; ~20 MGD dry-weather bypass, p.13; ITP 50 MGD average / 75 MGD peak, p.18; plant capacities Table 1, p.8*

[2] Government Finance Officers Association. (2012, February 28). *Achieving a Structurally Balanced Budget*. www.gfoa.org; Government Finance Officers Association. https://www.gfoa.org/materials/achieving-a-structurally-balanced-budget

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**GFOA supports the finance principles cited here: debt-management policy, matching debt to the useful life of assets, and funding recurring costs from recurring revenue. It does not verify the revenue estimate, the allocation percentages, the coverage ratio, or the proceeds range, which are the analysis's own modeling*

[3] Protect San Diego County's Health and Safety Act. (2025, December). *Section 22.519: Expenditure plan*. Filed with the San Diego County Registrar of Voters.

[4] United States International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC). (2026). *USIBWC Water Data Portal - Main-Channel River Gage* . Ibwc.gov; United States International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC). https://waterdata.ibwc.gov/AQWebportal/Data

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[6] Rico, B., Barsanti, K. C., Porter, W. C., Cysneiros de Carvalho, K., Stigler-Granados, P., & Prather, K. A. (2025). *Heavily polluted Tijuana River drives regional air quality crisis*. Science, 389(6763), eadv1343. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adv1343

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[8] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2025, December 15). *Trump Administration Announces*

Another Historic Milestone Toward Implementing 100% Solution to the Tijuana River Sewage Crisis | US EPA. US EPA; US EPA. https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/trump-administration announces-another-historic-milestone-toward-implementing-100
**USMCA $300M for the South Bay plant; total U.S. investment cited at more than $650M; Minute 333 signed*

[9] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2022, August 18). *U.S. and Mexico agree to invest $474M to address Tijuana River sewage problem*. Www.epa.gov; U.S. EPA. https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/us-and-mexico-agree-invest-474m-address-tijuana-river sewage-problem
**$330 million from the U.S. government and $144 million from Mexico). The 25-to-35 MGD expansion completed in 2025 and the 50 MGD target by December 31, 2027*

[10] Arcadis, & North American Development Bank. (2019). *TIJUANA RIVER DIVERSION STUDY: Flow Analysis, Infrastructure Diagnostic and Alternatives Development FINAL REPORT*. https://nadbank.org/hubfs/publicaciones-y estudios/tijuana_river_diversion_study_final_report_full_sm.pdf?hsLang=en

[11] US Environmental Protection Agency. (2021, January 13). *USMCA Tijuana River Watershed*. Www.epa.gov; US Environmental Protection Agency. https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-water-infrastructure/usmca-tijuana-river-watershed
*EPA reports that wet-weather events cause an average of 109 million gallons per day of transboundary flows.

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Appendix A. Illustrative Project Types and Basis of Estimate

Basis of estimate

The project types below are drawn from the published record: principally the 2019 binational diversion study [7], the 2026 five-pillar binational framework report [8], the federal and binational project commitments documented by the U.S. EPA and the USIBWC [5][10], and the measure's filed expenditure plan [9]. The categories and dollar ranges correspond to the allocation framework in Section 5; they are deliberately conservative, planning-level figures, not validated costs. Where the literature identifies a range of alternatives, as with border-area diversion and the configuration of treatment capacity, the selection is left to feasibility rather than presumed here.

Project types by category

Spending category (Section 5)	Illustrative project types (not sited, costed, or committed)	Basis / source
Capital construction, debt-financed (~$49M/yr debt service)	Border-area flow diversion and conveyance (diversion structure, pump station, pipeline); capture-and-treatment capacity, co-located with the federal plant or standalone, with treatment level set in design; dry-weather capture improvements in the tributary canyons; permanent sediment basins and trash-capture structures.	Diversion study [7]; five-pillar framework [8]
Community air quality and public health (~$8M/yr)	Indoor air filtration in affected homes; filtration and odor controls in schools and community facilities; engineering controls at the worst odor hot spots; a continuous air and water monitoring network and public dashboard.	County health assessment [4]; five-pillar framework [8]
Operations, maintenance, and program delivery (~$14.8M/yr)	Operation and maintenance of County-funded capture, treatment, and sediment infrastructure as it comes online; program management; monitoring, data, and public reporting.	GFOA practice [6]; five-pillar framework O&M findings [8]
Sediment, trash, and stormwater, operating share (~$5M/yr)	Recurring dredging and trash removal at priority sites, including the tributary canyons where wet-weather sediment and trash are heaviest.	Five-pillar framework [8]
Habitat and estuary restoration (~$2M/yr)	Restoration of the Tijuana River Estuary and adjacent wetlands, used as local match to leverage larger state and federal restoration grants.	Five-pillar framework [8]; state border programs
Independent oversight and audit (≤$1.2M/yr)	Citizen oversight committee; annual independent fiscal and performance audit; public reporting.	Measure expenditure plan, §22.519 [9]