

January 23, 2026

Subject: Public comment letter on the SAFER Bay DEIR

Dear San Francisquito Creek JPA,

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the SAFER Bay Draft Environmental Impact Report. While we wholeheartedly support the SAFER Bay Project and appreciate the consideration of many community concerns, such as project-related traffic congestion issues and public access to the shoreline, we have identified several areas that we believe require further development in the Updated EIR in order to advance equitable and effective flood adaptation— particularly for the East Palo Alto and Belle Haven communities, where inland flooding is already being experienced during stormy King Tides events, such as in December 2025 (see photos in Appendix).

Impacted community members are deeply concerned about being protected from flooding both now and in the future, particularly given the high cost of recovery from flood damages (which many residents cannot shoulder), and the current cost burden of FEMA flood insurance requirements. Many residents hope the SAFER project will eliminate the need for mandatory flood insurance, but also want assurance that the SAFER project will deliver the promised level of protection, since a flood occurring after neighborhoods are removed from FEMA flood zones could have devastating consequences. Please keep in mind these concerns as you review our comments.

These recommendations were developed in partnership with Jenn Hyman, the Citizens to Complete the Refuge, and the Sierra Club, as well as community leaders and residents.

1. The Updated EIR should comprehensively evaluate all sources of impacted coastal flooding, including sea level rise–induced groundwater rise.

[Research](#) by the Pathways Climate Institute and the San Francisco Estuary Institute demonstrates that low-lying inland areas may flood from emergent groundwater well before shoreline overtopping occurs. East Palo Alto already experiences flooding from shallow groundwater, a condition documented by the [Look Out Below](#) report by SPUR and Nuestra Casa in 2024.

Despite this evidence, the DEIR does not adequately assess current or future groundwater rise impacts, nor does it incorporate solutions to mitigate these risks. This omission risks exacerbating existing inequities in East Palo Alto. The Updated EIR should:

- Quantitatively assess current and future groundwater rise and compound flooding impacts in the project area.
- Identify and incorporate project-level measures to reduce groundwater emergence risks. Sequence construction so that interior drainage infrastructure is implemented before levee construction in areas where groundwater flooding is already an immediate hazard.

1a. Groundwater Emergence Hazards & the Steel Sheet Pile Wall. The proposed mile-long

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deep steel sheet pile wall along the South of Bay Road Reach presents a significant risk of exacerbating groundwater emergence hazards. Subsurface barriers can impede groundwater flow, inundate storm drains, and reduce drainage capacity—conditions already present and expected to worsen in East Palo Alto with sea level rise.

The Updated EIR should:

- Provide a hydrologic analysis of the sheet pile wall's potential to exacerbate groundwater emergence hazards under current and future sea level rise conditions through the project's life (out to 2100).
- Assess whether altered groundwater flow could mobilize contaminants into surface or drainage systems.
- Consider a long-term groundwater monitoring program to track and manage these risks.
- Identify mitigation measures or design alternatives to reduce subsurface barrier effects.

Given limited funding for sea level rise adaptation, multibenefit projects such as this should include necessary drainage upgrades, even if similar improvements appear in city master plans (like East Palo Alto's 2014 Stormwater Master Plan).

1b. Hazardous Materials Management. The SAFER project will be constructed along a shoreline with a long history of environmental contamination from historical and current industrial activities. Shoreline excavation has the potential to mobilize contaminants into Bay wetlands and waters and to expose construction workers, nearby residents, sensitive populations, and wildlife to hazardous substances. We have a number of concerns regarding proposals in the DEIR.

- **SAFER Health and Safety Plan:** Where SAFER will be constructed in areas with approved construction risk management plans (i.e., sites in the South of Bay Road and North of Bay Road reaches), the DEIR proposes to use the approved soil cleanup levels and protocols for those sites (page 3.10-19). However, the approved plans may not include adequate mitigation measures for a SAFER Health and Safety Plan.
 - **Require monitoring to ensure health & safety:** Existing site data may be incomplete, outdated, or based on criteria that are no longer considered protective. The EIR should require onsite soil and groundwater monitoring (i.e., field test kits, sensitive and specific chemical sensors) to be used during excavation in all reaches with past industrial use, requiring follow-up sampling and laboratory analysis when concentrations exceed screening levels.
- **Provide further protection from arsenic:** Several SAFER reaches contain elevated levels of arsenic, a major contributor to human health and cancer risk. Because levee slopes will not be paved and may be accessible to the public, the Updated DEIR should use of the Water Board's residential soil cleanup level of 11 mg/kg for arsenic, rather than less protective standards.

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- **Clean imported soil:** We are concerned about the potential for imported soil/fill for levees to bring additional toxins into the community. Imported soils used for levees should also be screened more rigorously. While the Master QAPP focuses on protecting wildlife habitat, SAFER levees are often adjacent to residences, workplaces, schools, or parcels planned for future housing or schools. Therefore, levee soils should meet the more protective of the Master QAPP screening levels or the Water Board's current Tier 1 Environmental Screening Levels, with both sets of thresholds clearly presented in the EIR. It should also be clearly stated that ESLs are screening tools, not cleanup levels.
- **Address potential excavation impacts on air quality:** We are concerned that the DEIR's air quality analysis concludes construction impacts will be less than significant without evaluating exposure to noncriteria toxic air contaminants, such as arsenic, PAHs, and VOCs, that may be released during excavation and soil handling. This omission is especially troubling for communities adjacent to contaminated sites. For reaches such as the South of Bay Road Reach, where contaminated soils are capped (such as at 1990 Bay Road), additional reach-specific mitigation measures should be required.

1c. Contaminant Mobilization & Groundwater Pumping. East Palo Alto has known shallow groundwater contamination. The introduction of new pumping systems could draw contaminated groundwater into stormwater infrastructure or discharge it to San Francisco Bay. The Updated EIR should:

- Provide stormwater and groundwater quality data demonstrating that pumped discharges would meet water quality standards, or
- Include treatment measures before discharge if contamination risks are present. Comparable facilities, such as San Francisco International Airport, acknowledge and treat contaminated stormwater drawn from shallow groundwater; similar considerations are warranted here, or
- Require accelerated groundwater cleanups by the responsible parties of local contaminated sites.

FEMA accreditation of floodwalls requires adequate interior drainage, typically through French drains and pump systems discharging over the wall. If such systems are anticipated, their design, impacts, and mitigation measures must be analyzed in the Updated EIR. See next section for more information.

2. The Updated EIR should revisit conclusions regarding hydrology and drainage impacts.

While the DEIR characterizes impacts to drainage patterns and utilities as less than significant with mitigation, it also acknowledges that the project would add runoff to East Palo Alto's storm drain system and could worsen flooding conditions without additional development.

Key issues requiring further analysis include:

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- The elimination of four gravity outfalls north of Bay Road and the resulting increased reliance on East Palo Alto's storm drainage system and the O'Connor Pump Station, which is located where groundwater levels are shallowest.
- The absence of quantitative analysis means that it is unclear if the proposed Runnymede Pump Station and existing O'Connor Pump Station can adequately handle post-project drainage demands.
- The lack of proportional mitigation for impacts to the O'Connor Pump Station, despite evidence that project-related drainage impacts may be substantial and were not anticipated in East Palo Alto's 2014 Stormwater Master Plan.

The Updated EIR should:

- Provide quantitative modeling of project-related drainage impacts and require proportional contributions to necessary pump station upgrades.
- Demonstrate, through analysis, that the Runnymede and O'Connor pump stations can adequately manage drainage with the project in place.
- Include conceptual drawings and analysis of the proposed Runnymede Pump Station, associated pipelines, and outfall locations, as well as their environmental impacts.

3. The Updated EIR should evaluate an additional mitigation strategy –a phased levee construction approach– to consider aesthetic impacts as well as lifespan and long-term maintenance concerns.

The DEIR appropriately concludes that Aesthetic Resources Impact AES-1 would be significant and unavoidable due to the height of the proposed levee and floodwall obstructing views of the Bay and marshlands. However, the Updated EIR should evaluate an additional mitigation strategy: a phased or adaptive construction approach, similar to an approach proposed by the Port of San Francisco in their recent [Waterfront Coastal Flood Study](#) (see Reach 3 Initial and Subsequent Actions, page 158-161). Specifically, the project should consider initially constructing earthen levees to FEMA-required heights, with additional elevation (e.g., steel floodwalls or concrete caps) added only when future sea level rise necessitates it. This approach aligns with the Bay Conservation and Development Commission's Regional Shoreline Adaptation Plan (RSAP), which emphasizes phased adaptation and cautions against building for the longest-term sea level projections prematurely. This approach could reduce near-term aesthetic impacts and avoid the risk of installing steel sheet piles decades before they are needed—particularly given their limited lifespan in marine environments and the potential for corrosion before they provide functional benefit.

4. Additional questions for the SAFER Bay Project Team:

- How will the SAFER project effectively integrate with the Bay Conservation and Development Commission's Regional Shoreline Adaptation Plan (RSAP) priorities and process? Although we are grateful to see this project moving forward, the community would like to understand how RSAP priorities will be incorporated.
- How will this project be funded? This is an ambitious and expensive project, and the

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community would like to understand how it will be funded and what, if any, costs there may be on residents through taxes or other strategies. Furthermore, how will the impacted cities fund the ongoing maintenance of the levee after completion? Poorly maintained levees that fail could lead to property damages and residential displacement.

We urge the San Francisquito JPA to address these issues comprehensively in the Updated EIR to ensure that the project delivers effective, equitable, and durable flood protection without creating new or exacerbated flooding and water quality risks for East Palo Alto, Menlo Park, and Redwood City.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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Nuestra Casa

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Appendix A. December 2025 Inland Flooding Photos

Photos of inland flooding in Belle Haven from December 24, 2025, between Willow Road and Henderson Avenue along Hamilton Avenue. Photos shared by Juanita Croft.

