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San Diego County Board of Supervisors
engage@sdcounty.ca.gov

Re: Recommendations for FY 2026–27 Budget

Dear Chair Lawson-Remer and Members of the Board of Supervisors,

San Diego County has identified a $300 million need to acquire and protect conservation land — and has budgeted zero dollars to meet it in the proposed budget for fiscal year 2026-27. Meanwhile, the County is quietly proposing to spend money on a surveillance program that has already violated state law. I respectfully request the Board redirect that funding to land conservation, and to consider a couple process improvements that would help San Diegans engage more meaningfully in budget decisions.

I am a proud San Diegan, raised in Escondido, with over a decade of professional experience in environmental policy and a Bachelor of Science in Earth Systems from Stanford University.

More of San Diego's Natural Heritage is Worthy of Protection

San Diego County is a biodiversity hotspot with "the largest number of imperiled species of any county in the continental United States."[1] It lies within the California Floristic Province, one of only 25 global biodiversity hotspots identified by Myers et al. as among the highest-priority targets for conservation investment on Earth.[2] It follows that a disproportionate percentage of San Diego County should be conserved to protect the world's biodiversity.

Permanently protecting San Diego's wild lands is among the most beneficial actions the County can take to steward the local environment and protect San Diegans' way of life. Conservation lands filter stormwater, clean our air, provide habitat for wildlife,[3] store

[1] SANDAG. "Appendix Q: Regional Habitat Conservation Vision." *2025 Regional Plan*. San Diego: SANDAG, 2025, Q.2. https://www.sandag.org/regional-plan/-/media/33EF6358FAD8489C8238F36ADCAFCA54.ashx.
[2] Myers, N., R.A. Mittermeier, C.G. Mittermeier, G.A.B. da Fonseca, and J. Kent. "Biodiversity Hotspots for Conservation Priorities." *Nature* 403 (February 24, 2000): 853–858. https://doi.org/10.1038/35002501.
[3] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "Environmental Benefits of Green Infrastructure." Last updated December 30, 2025. https://www.epa.gov/green-infrastructure/environmental-benefits-green-infrastructure.

carbon,[4] benefit San Diegans' mental health,[5] and create recreational opportunities for our communities.[6]

The County has done the rigorous work of identifying priority lands for conservation through its Multiple Species Conservation Program. The lands identified in this program hold value regardless of whether the North and East County plans are adopted, and the County should have funds available for acquisition when priority properties are listed for sale.

It's important to recognize that every time open space is developed, people and wildlife in San Diego feel that loss. I grew up in San Diego County, where my mother and I walked through an open field every day on our way to and from my preschool. We counted ladybugs on the bushes as we walked. Over time, I watched the ladybug bushes disappear, along with orange groves and acres of natural habitat. It's possible that ladybug field was always zoned for development. The County knew. But my mother and I didn't. Most San Diegans don't read general plans. All we know is that we pass open space on our way to work, and our commute is better for it. When that open space is filled, we register it as a loss, as do the wildlife who currently utilize it. The loss of that field during my childhood helped to inspire my career in environmental advocacy, and similar losses are likely being experienced by children just like me throughout the County today.

Increasing the County's budget to purchase conservation lands is a worthwhile investment in San Diegans' quality of life as well as our planet's natural heritage.

Conservation Funding is Needed

The County's proposed budget includes $0 for conservation land acquisition for the upcoming fiscal year,[7] despite noting a $300 million need through 2041.[8] This funding deficit could result in losing lands that provide enormous benefits to San Diego right now and that are critical to global biodiversity initiatives.

The most recent National Resources Inventory Summary Report shows that California lost an average of 33,380 acres a year to development from 2017 to 2022 – that's about 91 acres

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[4] U.S. Department of the Interior. "Interior Releases Study of Carbon Storage and Sequestration in Western Ecosystems as Part of National Assessment." December 5, 2012. https://www.doi.gov/news/pressreleases/interior-releases-study-of-carbon-storage-and-sequestration-in-western-ecosystems-as-part-of-national-assessment.

[5] Bratman, Gregory N., Christopher B. Anderson, Marc G. Berman, et al. "Nature and Mental Health: An Ecosystem Service Perspective." *Science Advances* 5 (July 24, 2019): eaax0903. https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aax0903.

[6] San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation. "Find a Park by Category." Accessed June 7, 2026. https://www.sdparks.org/content/sdparks/en/FindAParkDirectory.html.

[7] San Diego County. *CAO Recommended Operational Plan, Fiscal Years 2026–27 and 2027–28*. Section 4.13, "Capital Improvement Needs Assessment: Fiscal Years 2026–31," 639.

[8] Ibid., 643.

per day.[9] Today, there are efforts at the state and local level, like the County's "Streamlining Pathways for Housing and Agriculture"[10] project designed to facilitate development, that could intensify development pressure on San Diego's most sensitive lands. Further, a recent article in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* suggests that the housing affordability crisis in San Diego, and throughout California, could be driving development toward the Wildland-Urban Interface threatening San Diego's wild lands.[11] As development incentives increase, the County must be prepared to protect its natural resources.

Unfortunately, lack of funding has been recognized as a major barrier to meeting the County's conservation goals by the San Diego Biodiversity Conservation Summit, co-organized by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) and the San Diego Natural History Museum.[12] Meeting the need projected in the County's Capital Improvement Needs Assessment by 2041 would require an annual appropriation of $20 million. The current proposal of $0 should be a nonstarter. The County must find a permanent solution for annually funding conservation in the region at levels that meet established need. For now, it should start by raising its proposal for land acquisition in next fiscal year's budget to as close to $20 million as possible.

Funding Currently Proposed for Flock Should be Redirected

San Diego County's budget is tight, and resources should first be allocated to essential services for our community like ensuring adequate healthcare for San Diegans. There is at least one obvious program, however, where limited resources should not be spent: illegal mass surveillance. The County must end its contract with Flock and redirect funding proposed for Flock to programs that provide community benefit like conservation land acquisition.

On May 27, 2026, County staff disclosed during a community budget hearing that the County was proposing to continue spending money on a contract with Flock. The amount of money proposed for Flock is not obviously accessible in public budget documents, but it should be. What we do know is that the city of San Diego pays approximately $2 million for

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[9] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service. *Summary Report: 2022 National Resources Inventory*. Washington, DC: USDA, 2025, Table 1, pp. 3-5–3-6. https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2026-02/2022%20NRI%20Summary%20Report.pdf. California non-federal developed land increased from 6,322.0 thousand acres (2017) to 6,488.9 thousand acres (2022), a net gain of 166,900 acres over five years (33,380 acres per year; 91.5 acres per day).

[10] San Diego County Planning & Development Services. "Streamlining Pathways for Housing and Agriculture." Accessed June 8, 2026. https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/pds/ceqa/streamlining-pathways-for-housing-and-agriculture.html.

[11] Greenberg, Miriam, Hillary Angelo, Elena Losada, and Christopher C. Wilmers. "Relational Geographies of Urban Unsustainability: The Entanglement of California's Housing Crisis with WUI Growth and Climate Change." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 121, no. 32 (2024): e2310080121. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2310080121.

[12] SANDAG, "Appendix Q," Q.8–Q.9.

Flock every year,[13] so it's possible the County is also spending millions of dollars on this surveillance.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has documented that, unlike a targeted Automatic License Plate Reader (ALPR) system "designed to take pictures of license plates, check the plates against local hot lists, and then flush the data if there's no hit, Flock is building a giant camera network that records people's comings and goings across the nation, and then makes that data available for search by any of its law enforcement customers."[14] This technology presents Fourth Amendment concerns, and has already been used illegally in San Diego.

California's Senate Bill 34 (2015) prohibits law enforcement agencies from sharing ALPR data with out-of-state or federal entities.[15] According to records obtained by Oakland Privacy and reported by CalMatters in June 2025, the San Diego County Sheriff's Department conducted searches of license plate data on behalf of U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Border Patrol[16] — in direct violation of SB 34.

The Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable searches and seizures. The Supreme Court has already addressed the constitutional limits of government location tracking. In *Carpenter v. United States* (2018), the Court ruled that accessing cell-site location information from a person's cell phone without probable cause is a violation of the Fourth Amendment. Cell-site information, like Flock, allows the government to, "travel back in time to retrace a person's whereabouts."[17] Flock makes this data accessible to law enforcement nationwide without probable cause. The Supreme Court's reasoning in *Carpenter* — that comprehensive location tracking implicates the Fourth Amendment — suggests that Flock's network-wide data collection raises similar concerns. Whether Flock's use of mass location data violates the Fourth Amendment is currently being tested

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[13] Murphy, Kate. "San Diego Approves Continued License Plate Reader Use." *Axios San Diego*, December 10, 2025. https://www.axios.com/local/san-diego/2025/12/10/san-diego-police-flock-license-plate-surveillance-cameras.

[14] Marlow, Chad, and Jay Stanley. "How to Pump the Brakes on Your Police Department's Use of Flock's Mass Surveillance License Plate Readers." American Civil Liberties Union, February 13, 2023. https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/how-to-pump-the-brakes-on-your-police-departments-use-of-flocks-mass-surveillance-license-plate-readers.

[15] Civ. Code, § 1798.90.55, subd. (b). (enacted as Senate Bill 34, 2015). See also California Department of Justice. "Department of Law Enforcement Guidance 06." 2023. https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/media/2023-dle-06.pdf.

[16] Johnson, Khari, and Mohamed Al Elew. "California Police Are Illegally Sharing License Plate Data with ICE and Border Patrol." *CalMatters*, June 13, 2025. https://calmatters.org/economy/technology/2025/06/california-police-sharing-license-plate-reader-data/.

[17] *Carpenter v. United States*, 585 U.S. 296 (2018). The quoted language ("travel back in time to retrace a person's whereabouts") is from Chief Justice Roberts' majority opinion. https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/585/16-402/.

before the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.[18] As Flock expands its reach, the County's exposure to these constitutional challenges grows with it. What is clear is that Flock violates, at the very least, the spirit of all San Diegans' constitutional rights.

San Diegans' limited taxpayer dollars should not be funding activity that the State of California has explicitly forbidden and that may violate San Diegans' constitutional rights. The money proposed to go toward Flock in the proposed County budget must immediately be redirected toward worthier causes.

Meaningful Public Participation Requires Process Improvements

County staff have been very helpful in understanding the proposed budget and providing spaces for the public to ask questions. However, two improvements would allow the public to participate in a more meaningful fashion.

First, the entirety of the budget proposal should be easily accessible. The operations plan provided to the public for the proposed budget includes broad categories of expenses, rather than line-item proposals. These line-item details matter significantly. The proposed Flock funding, for example, does not appear in the broad categories made available to the public. The public deserves to know exactly what programs are proposed for funding, and at what levels. Having this information will allow for more informed participation in a budget process where advocating for increased funding for one program necessarily means less funding for another.

Second, all the public's comments must be treated seriously, and County staff should incorporate public feedback into its revised proposals. The current deadline for public comment on the proposed budget is June 11th. However, San Diego County's website notes that a revised recommended budget will be available online on June 12th.[19] If the County receives ample public comments before the 5:00 PM Pacific deadline on June 11th, it is difficult to believe the County will be able to meaningfully review those comments and make recommended changes in the revised recommended budget within twenty-four hours. County staff deserve a process that allows them more time to consider public comments before producing a revised budget, and the public deserve to know that their feedback is being meaningfully considered.

It is my hope that in the next budget cycle, the documents offered to the public will be more detailed and that there will be more time between the comment period and any revised budget document.

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[18] American Civil Liberties Union, ACLU of Virginia, and Electronic Frontier Foundation. Amicus Curiae Brief. *Schmidt v. City of Norfolk*, United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, April 20, 2026. https://www.aclu.org/cases/schmidt-v-norfolk.

[19] San Diego County. "Open Budget." Accessed June 8, 2026. https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/openbudget/en/home.html#v1-5968c78939-item-39f763156f.

Conclusion

I urge the San Diego Board of Supervisors to:

1. Restore dedicated annual funding for conservation land acquisition at $20 million per year.
2. Redirect the funding from the County Sheriff's Flock Safety surveillance contract to land conservation.
3. Increase transparency in the budget process and allow more time for meaningful public participation.

I sincerely thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to continuing to work with you to improve San Diego's natural resources and quality of life.

Sincerely,

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