

Penny sales tax proposal for better fire protection could reach the ballot

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Two boxes from the Calaveras Local Fire Protection Committee bearing the signatures of 3,004 residents were delivered to the election's office.

The petition drive, which began in October, aims to place a measure on the ballot seeking voter approval for a 1-cent-per-dollar sales tax increase to fund local fire protection agencies.

Proponents of the Calaveras Local Fire Protection Tax Initiative are Dana M. Nichols of San Andreas, Robert T. Dean of Mokelumne Hill and Skip and Shannon Sharp of Mountain Ranch. Along with Faith Hall, they also are members of the Calaveras Local Fire Protection Committee.

The Calaveras Local Fire Protection Committee website asserts that this measure would provide funding to improve emergency response in all nine local fire districts as well as the municipal fire department in Angels Camp.

Based on actual sales tax distributions, a 1-cent-per-dollar sales tax during the 2020-21 fiscal year would have provided \$5.68 million, enough when distributed to allow each fire agency to address its needs, such as purchasing equipment, repairing facilities, incentives for volunteers, hiring firefighters for entry-level wages to staff stations 24-hours a day, hiring firefighters to increase the number on engines, or addressing other limits to recruiting, training, equipping, housing and retaining firefighters. Most of the county's fire districts depend on volunteer firefighters and trainees.

Unlike most of the ballot initiatives circulated in California, this effort was done entirely by citizen volunteers. No one was paid to gather any signatures.

"It's a major achievement for this community to achieve this entirely with volunteers," said Nichols' "Lots of people stepped forward to help. This is about one of the most basic of services. They come when you need them and it's a basic human thing to take care of each other. This is about honoring human life and taking care of each other.

According to Rebecca Turner, clerk-recorder and registrar of voters of Calaveras County, the committee needed to collect 2,161 valid signatures of county voters to qualify the initiative for the ballot. The elections office has up to 30 days not including holidays or weekends to complete the signature verification process. If the petition is deemed sufficient, the elections office will bring the item to the Board of Supervisors for placement on the November 2022 ballot. If the measure is passed by the voters in would go into effect upon certification of the election. This is a citizen's initiative and needs a simple majority to vote to pass.

"We believed in the community and the community came through," said Sharp.