San Diego air district overhaul underway with selections for new oversight board

California auditor has criticized the Air Pollution Control District for being unresponsive to the public, subsidizing polluters

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The San Diego Air Pollution Control District — the region’s top watchdog agency for industrial air contamination — is in the midst of a major overhaul.

On Monday, elected leaders approved five new members to sit on the air district’s newly expanded governing board, which must be established by March. The county Board of Supervisors has served as the agency’s decision-making panel since 1995.
The state air board has traditionally regulated emissions from mobile sources such as cars and trucks, while regional air districts oversee stationary sources such as industrial plants.

However, advocates working in low-income neighborhoods in San Diego would like to see the air district ramp up efforts to regulate everything from diesel-powered freight trucks to cranes and forklifts, especially at the Port of San Diego.

The revamped air district board will include 11 representatives, including two county supervisors, six elected officials from cities around the county and three members of the public. The changes are part of a sweeping reform bill spearheaded by San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria during his time in the state Legislature.

A selection committee of city officials from around the region voted unanimously on Monday to seat: Oceanside Mayor Esther Sanchez, San Diego City Councilman Sean Elo-Rivera, Escondido City Councilwoman Consuelo Martinez, La Mesa City Councilman Jack Shu and National City Councilman Marcus Bush.

Supervisor Nathan Fletcher, as a member of the California Air Resources Board, and another supervisor will also join the new air district board, as will Gloria, or a council member of his choosing.

Elected officials on the board are required to fill the three remaining seats with members of the public. Those chosen must include a physician or public health professional, an individual with scientific or technical background in air pollution, and an advocate who works with disadvantaged communities on air-quality issues.

The air district — one of 35 overseen by the state air board — will be the first in California to require its board include a person representing “environmental justice” communities, low-income neighborhoods highly impacted by air pollution.

“This is a new era for air quality in San Diego,” said Environmental Health Coalition Executive Director Diane Takvorian. “We’re thrilled to congratulate the newly appointed elected members.”

Last summer, a state audit slammed the San Diego air district for subsidizing permit costs for polluting businesses with vehicle-registration fees. The agency, which gets about 40 percent of its budget from those fees, didn’t contest the findings.
The state report also found the agency hasn’t taken “adequate steps” to engage the public or properly track and address citizen complaints.

The agency must now launch a new user-friendly website by the end of the year, informing the public about meetings, enforcement actions and more. Some of that material has been available but was been buried on the county’s website.

The air district will also be required to publish an annual air-quality report, identifying pollution levels, enforcement actions and other metrics.

Gloria’s bill overhauling the district brings the governing structure of San Diego’s air district in line with the other large regional air-pollution agencies throughout California, including the South Coast Air Quality Management District, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.