To hear former San Quentin State Prison Warden Jeanne Woodford tell it, the death penalty is all but dead in California.

"The political consensus is that California's death penalty is on its way out," she told an audience of about 70 people Saturday in the auditorium at the Redwoods in Mill Valley. "The question remains when and how it will go."

The 61-year-old Woodford, who oversaw four executions during her five-year stint as warden of San Quentin, was a prominent leader in last year's narrowly defeated Proposition 34 campaign to replace the death penalty with life in prison without possibility of parole.

On the eve of the election, a Field Poll showed the Prop. 34 initiative in the lead. It ended up losing 48 percent to 52 percent, a margin of just 500,000 votes.

She pointed out that public opinion has changed drastically since the death penalty was reinstated in 1978, when 70 percent of California voters favored it. Since then, it has cost the state $4 billion to administer.

"If 250,001 voters had changed their minds and voted yes, we would have won and no longer have the death penalty in this state," she said, adding, "We did succeed in forever changing the landscape on this issue in this state. With 48 percent of voters supporting repeal, we have shown that the state is now evenly divided on the death penalty. We have fundamentally changed the conversation."

In opposing the death penalty, Woodford, who rose through the ranks to become the director of the entire California prison system, says she knows from first hand experience that it wastes money, does not make law-abiding citizens any safer and risks executing death row inmates who may have been wrongfully convicted and are innocent.

She cited the case of convicted serial killer Richard Ramirez, aka the Night Stalker, as an example of how wasteful the death penalty is. Ramirez died of cancer at Marin General Hospital in June at age 53.

"Ramirez spent many, many years on death row," she said. "He'd been in trials in three counties and had retrials in at least one of those counties. Millions and millions of dollars were spent on Richard Ramirez and he ended up dying of natural causes. And yet we continue the death penalty."

Woodford retired from the prison system in 2006 and has since become a leading advocate for repeal of the death penalty in California, helping launch the SAFE California Campaign.

She pointed out that voters in Marin, San Francisco and Los Angeles overwhelmingly voted in favor of Prop. 34, and said she believes it would have passed if the campaign had had enough money for TV and radio ads in counties where it lost, like San Diego and Sacramento.

"If we just had a couple million more dollars, we would have won," she said.
Her talk was sponsored jointly by the Marin Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and Mill Valley Seniors for Peace. Woodford didn't say when the anti-death penalty forces would put another initiative on the ballot. But she did say that they may have to fight against one by their opponents first.

"The California District Attorneys Association and the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation have said they intend to file an initiative for the 2014 election that would 'streamline' the appeals process for death penalty cases, much like Florida has recently done," she told the gathering. "If they do file, the SAFE California campaign and our supporters are ready to act. We will have to fight against such an initiative in California."

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