

Now's time to trade in gas-guzzling mowers

SJ air district offering deal for electric ones

BEE STAFF REPORTS

Modesto Bee, Tuesday, April 24, 2007

Still hankering to get your hands on one of those nonpolluting, cordless electric lawn mowers?

Well, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has got a deal for you.

Each year, the district offers residents a sizable discount on electric mowers.

A single gas mower can emit as much pollution as 40 new or late-model cars operating during the same period of time, according to the air district.

Electric mowers produce no emissions and are lighter, quieter and easier to use.

The San Joaquin Valley air basin is classified by the Environmental Protection Agency as "serious nonattainment" for the national eight-hour ozone standard and must reduce ozone pollution within the district's eight counties: Stanislaus, Merced, San Joaquin, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and the valley portion of Kern.

This year, participants don't have to wait in line at single-day events or travel outside their county to take advantage of the lawn mower trade-in offer.

Instead, the district is giving residents six weeks to request a program voucher and turn in their gas mowers at county recycling centers.

The voucher and trade-in program allows residents to buy a Neuton cordless, electric lawn mower at a huge discount.

Neuton and the district are offering a \$418 nonpolluting electric mower for \$150 with trade-in.

Here's how it works:

Upon request, the district will provide a coded voucher to valley residents, who then can turn in their old mower, drained of all fluids, at a participating recycler in the county in which they live.

The recycler will add a coded sticker to their voucher. Mowers retired through this program will be recycled for their raw materials.

The participant then calls the Neuton Lawn Co.'s toll-free number to order their new mower, including a rear bag, rechargeable battery and mulching kit. The new mower is delivered directly to the customer's home within a few days.

Vouchers can be requested by e-mailing public.education@valleyair.org or by calling one of the three district offices.

In Modesto, call 557-6400; Bakersfield, 661-326-6900; and Fresno, 559-230-5800.

Air district wants to replace polluting gas mowers

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, April 24, 2007

Valley air-quality officials are offering non-polluting, battery-operated lawnmowers at a steep discount.

All homeowners have to do is give up their old gasoline-driven, smoke-belching mowers, said Jaime Holt of the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District. The air district estimates that one gas mower is capable of producing as much pollution as 40 new or late-model cars operating over the same period of time. This is the sixth year the district has tried to cut the number of gas-powered lawn mowers. This time, however, the district says it will be easier because residents can start the process by phone or online. The mowers, made by Neutron Lawn Co., will cost residents \$150 - a discount of \$268.

Here's how it works:

- Residents can request a voucher via e-mail at public.education@valleyair.org or by calling the Fresno district office at 230-6000. Vouchers should arrive in the mail in a couple of days.
- The vouchers provide information on how and where to go to get rid of the gas mower.
- Once the old mower is recycled, a new electric mower can be ordered for \$150 through the toll-free number. Included with the mower is a rear bag, rechargeable battery and mulching kit. The mower is delivered directly to your home in just a couple of days.

Holt, media contact at the central district office in Fresno, said that the battery on the Neuton mower can last one to two hours on a full charge. She said the electric mower is capable of handling the average suburban lawn but that residents with larger lawns may want to consider purchasing an extra battery.

District upgrading school bus fleet

By Bettina Adragna

Selma Enterprise Tues. April 24, 2007

They're shinier, more comfortable and just a little bit safer than the old ones.

New buses are replacing the 30-year-old vehicles for Selma Unified School District at the rate of two per week. There will be a total of 14 low-sulfur diesel buses. New features include an automatic transmission, a fluid brake system and seat belts, since seat belts are now required by law. Fourteen of the older buses will be sent to the salvage yard to be crushed.

"It's so much smoother and quieter," said Tony Lopez, mechanic for the school district. "No matter how much you work, the buses are still 30 years old. . . age is age."

Supervisor of Transportation Wade Smith has mixed feelings about the new buses, because of the older buses being crushed. This is mandated under grants from the California Air Resources Board and the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District that made the new buses possible.

"It's bittersweet," he said. "They're in such great shape. I hate to see all the [old] buses go to salvage."

Smith said the new buses can hold fewer students than the old ones because of the seat belt requirement.

"What I could usually do with one bus now needs two buses," he said.

Still, Smith said he was glad the district was able to get the grants.

"It's fantastic that the district is getting a chance to get new buses," he said. "It's way overdue."

According to Lopez, the newer buses are not only more pleasant for the drivers, they will save the district money. Because the transmission is computer-controlled and equipped with a retarder

system, the drivers will have to use less brake pressure. This means a longer brake life.

The old buses were manufactured in 1973 and 1976. When a part broke down, Lopez had to find an outdated part or fabricate one. Under law, only certain parts could be fabricated.

"It [was] an act of Congress to try to find something to adapt," said Lopez. "1973 is too old. They don't make parts for that anymore."

Though the old buses are safe, the new buses will be even safer, thanks to remote-control front mirrors, the seat belts, a reinforced frame, and an amber light system that will warn drivers that are 200 feet behind the bus before it stops.

The old buses still had the an interior wall, as well as the outside wall, to protect the children. But the updated vehicles have outriggers that extend from the interior wall to the outside.

Lopez said, "If a car smashes into it, it's probably just going to dent it, but the car's going to be demolished."

The new fleet will also come with perks such as a CD player and quadraphonic speakers.

The automatic transmission is also easier for drivers.

"I don't have to worry about shifting all day," said driver Patty McGee. "It's a very comfortable bus. Nice stereo system too."

Smith emphasized that the older buses were not below standards, but it took a lot of work to keep them up to those standards.

"The school buses are the safest form of transportation to and from school," he said. "It's kind of bittersweet to see them go to the salvage yard. I don't think anyone in the public or the district realizes the effort it took to keep them up to par."

According to Lopez, the district has its own standards which go above and beyond the state standards. They plan to paint the undercarriages silver this summer, which will make rust stains and cracks show up. This isn't required by law. Neither are the gauges placed on the rear tires to tell drivers if they need more pressure.

Still, the motor carrier branch of California Highway Patrol inspects the whole fleet each year.

"Each bus is inspected bumper to bumper to make sure it complies with the law," said Lopez.

All this is good for the district. Most importantly, it protects the driver and the riders.

"We've got precious cargo," said Lopez. "There's no room for mistakes."

Feds Abuse Transit Vouchers

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the N.Y. Times and other papers, Tuesday, April 24, 2007

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Federal employees are going online to sell the mass transit fare cards the government buys them, congressional auditors say.

Employees are also exaggerating their commuting costs, and some continue to receive transportation subsidies after leaving the government.

Abuses in the mass transit benefits program for government workers are wasting tens of millions of dollars each year, says Congress' Government Accountability Office.

Using seven agencies' mass transit records, investigators found at least \$17 million in fraudulent transit benefits claimed in the Washington metropolitan area during 2006. That amount "could be millions more" if fraud exists in the dozens of agencies the GAO did not review, auditors say in testimony prepared for a Senate hearing Tuesday.

In three days of online searches, the GAO found at least 20 federal employees who were fraudulently selling their fare cards on eBay. Posing as buyers, investigators purchased benefits from three employees on Craigslist. In other cases, employees claimed benefits while on leave, gave the cards to friends and family or used them for personal travel.

One Treasury Department employee drove to work, parked for free and collected \$105 per month in Metro fare cards -- most of which he sold on eBay. A Commerce Department worker left in 2001, but the agency sent her \$65 per month in transit benefits until she moved to a new address in 2006.

"The waste and fraud in this program is not a result of someone being asleep at the wheel, but rather it's a case of no one being behind the wheel at all," said Sen. [Norm Coleman](#) of Minnesota, the senior Republican on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee's investigations subcommittee.

The transit program provides benefits to about 250,000 federal government employees nationwide, who claimed roughly \$250 million in travel subsidies during fiscal year 2006. About 120,000 of the participants live in Washington and its Maryland and Virginia suburbs.

GAO investigators also found federal employees intentionally inflating their transportation expenses. One Transportation Department employee, for example, claimed the maximum benefit of \$105 per month when his cost to commute was \$54.

The transit benefits program is aimed at encouraging federal employees to use mass transit as a way to curb traffic congestion and air pollution.

The federal government distributes vouchers or cards to employees nationwide that allow them to take buses, regional trains or the area's Metro system to work. The benefit is free to employees and tax-exempt.

Employees are prohibited from transferring or selling their transit benefits and are supposed to return unused funds. They must certify they are using the subsidies for commuting purposes and say they understand selling or transferring the subsidies is prohibited.

The Transportation Department administers the program for roughly 75 percent of the federal government.

Air quality crusader learned craft from the ground up

By Chip Johnson

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, April 24, 2007

Two decades ago, Margaret Gordon was a housekeeper whose list of clients included Michael Herz, founder of BayKeeper, a nonprofit watchdog group that monitored water quality in the Bay Area.

Herz, who moved to New England in 1994, remembers a very inquisitive woman to whom he passed along his magazines on nature, the environment and social causes.

"She's what we here in Maine would call 'wicked smart,' " he said Monday.

On Saturday, the rest of the East Bay -- and beyond -- will learn what Herz has known for years when Gordon is inducted into the Alameda County Women's Hall of Fame for her activism in the fight against air pollution in West Oakland. She will be one of 10 honored at a luncheon at the Fremont Marriott.

Gordon, now a 60-year-old with 11 grandkids, said her activism was born after she started reading everything she could get her hands on. Things just sort of mushroomed from there.

"I spent so much time reading that after I while I wanted to discuss the book or magazine article I'd just (mentally) digested," she said. "I can't tell you how I did it, but that stuff just stuck in my brain."

And when Gordon started sifting through what she'd read and learned and compared it to her experiences in West Oakland, a light clicked on.

"I always had asthma," Gordon told me Monday, "but the attacks got worse when I moved across town to West Oakland in 1992.

"My grandson was born with severe asthma, and once I started reading about some of the root causes -- and asking questions -- especially to those people who'd been hospitalized for asthma, it became clear there was a relationship between people who live in this community and their ZIP codes."

Over the years, Gordon has taken college courses and attended workshops and seminars on environmental science and its application to community issues.

She has become a dynamo in community organizing and a force to be reckoned with in public meetings where the topic is air quality in West Oakland, a community with one of the highest asthma rates in the nation.

In 2001, she and the Pacific Institute, an environmental research and policy group in the city, launched the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project.

Since then, the project has conducted half a dozen studies of air quality, truck and shipping traffic at the Port of Oakland, and the rail and truck terminals that service trucks and trains. The group's first report, an 18-month effort, showed that diesel emissions in West Oakland were five times higher than in the rest of the city.

Most recently, Gordon co-wrote "Healthy Home Indoor Air Quality Project," a report proposing ways to reduce diesel emissions in the community. The document has been submitted to local and federal environmental health agencies.

"We were able to show that during certain times of the year there is a pollution spike because of port activity," she said, "and one of the things we found is that ships produce up to 76 percent of the emissions in West Oakland. They use bunker fuel -- and that's the stuff from the bottom of the tanks, the thickest stuff they use."

Her work has inspired others, including members of her own family and some of the professionals who've met and worked with her over the years.

"She is a brilliant thinker and a true street scholar," said Catalina Garzon, a UC Berkeley graduate student who's known Gordon for nearly a decade. "I've learned as much from her about how to make change in the world as I have in the program. Her experience as a community

resident dealing with all these issues has helped her find a way to funnel it into a source of change in the community.

"It takes a while to build trust with her," Garzon added, "but once she sees you're committed to these issues and offering to help -- and you've proven your mettle -- she can be a great mentor."

Gordon's community passions have also rubbed off on at least one family member.

"I grew up in Reno, but those trips to San Francisco and Oakland with her gave me a different perspective, and it's the reason I want to go into sociology -- I want to help," said her niece Brittany Hunter, 17, a senior at Sparks High School who will enter Howard University as a freshman next fall.

Gordon said her work over the past two decades has shown her that you can bring change to the community, but it takes a while to develop a strategy to accomplish that.

"It's like playing basketball," Gordon said. "You have to have an outside game and an inside game.

"The outside game is to do outreach and educate the people living in the impacted areas. The inside game is to know how to bring people from the community to the table with the people whose job it is to regulate and enforce environmental laws and make a change. The challenge is bringing them to the table and starting that dialogue."

Judging by her track record so far, I'd say Gordon's still got game.

[Sacramento Bee, Commentary, Tuesday, April 24, 2007](#)

Daniel Weintraub: State's global warming fight is about to get real

By Daniel Weintraub -

California's landmark law to combat global warming by limiting greenhouse gas emissions is about to go from theory to practice, testing the political viability of regulations that could crimp the state's car-happy lifestyle and drive up costs for consumers.

The new rules could increase the cost of gasoline, add another step to annual smog-check inspections and make automobile air conditioning more expensive to repair. They might also force farms to change the way they manage everything from engines on equipment to manure piles from livestock.

The concept behind the global warming law -- known as Assembly Bill 32 -- is hugely popular in California. Polls show that more than 60 percent of Californians support the law, which seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent from projected levels by 2020.

But so far, most people know only that California is taking the lead among the states and the federal government in tackling the issue. Voters like the idea of their state getting out ahead on a problem they think is real and needs to be addressed. Soon they will begin seeing how all of this might affect them.

Last week, the California Air Resources Board released a list of 36 proposed "early actions" to implement AB 32. These are the low-hanging fruit that regulators think can be achieved relatively quickly and relatively easily. The rules are supposed to be implemented by Jan. 1, 2010, two years before the rest of the regulations prompted by the bill are likely to take effect.

Actually, only three of the 36 measures truly fit the law's definition of early actions that can be implemented by that date. They are:

- A low-carbon fuel standard requiring oil refineries and shippers to reduce by 10 percent the amount of carbon dioxide emissions released in the production and use of motor vehicle fuel.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed this new standard earlier this year and the air board is already working to develop it.

- Restrictions on hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) produced by recharging leaky automotive air conditioning systems. HFCs were developed as a substitute for chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which were found to deplete the ozone. But HFCs, according to the air board, represent a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. The board wants to force motorists to have their air conditioning repaired by a licensed mechanic rather than doing it at home because sloppy home repairs are thought to release too many HFCs into the atmosphere.
- Installation of emission control systems at garbage landfills. Landfills produce methane gas, which is typically collected and burned on site, a process that creates greenhouse gas emissions. The state wants to require landfill operators to install new equipment that would capture more of those emissions before they reach the atmosphere.

Those three rules, the air board says, would reduce the emissions of carbon dioxide or its equivalent by as much as 26 million metric tons by 2020, bringing the state about 15 percent toward its goal of a reduction of 174 million metric tons.

The air board identified another 23 actions that, taken together, would reduce emissions by at least 20 million metric tons. These rules would be put on a fasttrack but might not be ready by 2010.

They include better "manure management" on farms, using electricity rather than gas or diesel fuel to power stationary agricultural equipment, requiring a new smog-check test to detect and repair leaking air conditioning systems, forcing truckers to plug into electric outlets at truck stops rather than idling on diesel fuel, and doing the same for ships in port. The state might also adopt new rules for road and parking lot paving, roofs, and automobile paints to reduce heating of the atmosphere.

The board also noted that it is already considering another 10 regulations that were originally aimed at reducing smog but which might also contribute to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Those rules, scheduled for consideration over the next three years, would involve limiting diesel emissions from ships, trucks and equipment and new standards for gasoline dispenser hoses and portable fuel tanks for outboard boat engines.

Although each of these actions might have short-term costs, regulators believe that many will actually save money in the long run, especially if they force people and businesses to use energy more efficiently. AB 32 requires that all of the air board's greenhouse gas rules be "cost-effective," but that term was not defined in the bill and the air board said last week it is still working on a definition that will guide much of its work in the years ahead.

One big pending regulation -- a requirement that automobile manufacturers reduce the greenhouse gas emissions from the cars they sell in California -- would save a potential 30 million metric tons of emissions annually by 2020, achieving about 17 percent of the state's goal in one swoop. State officials say the rule would also save consumers \$5 billion a year by reducing the cost of operating their cars. But the auto industry is suing to try to block the new rule.

We can probably expect that fight to be only the first among many.

[Hanford Sentinel, Commentary, Monday, April 23, 2007 \(12:38 pm\):](#)

So She Thought: An environmentalist's lament

By Diane Sayre

I have always considered myself an environmentalist, albeit a somewhat confused one. It's a funny thing, though. Calling yourself an environmentalist in the rural, conservative area we live in can sometimes be a dangerous thing.

For many folks around here, the term "environmentalist" is synonymous with granola-loving social outcasts who blow up lumber trucks, stage protests at Hetch Hechy, and wear Birkenstocks. "Oh, you're one of those tree huggers, huh?" people will ask, looking at you sideways.

So just for the record, I want to clarify one thing: I have never owned a pair of Birkenstocks. On a lesser note, I've also never been to Hetch Hechy, and if I ever blow anything up, it's far more likely to be something I'm trying to cook in the microwave rather than an 18-wheeler.

But I am an environmentalist. And I do try to be a good steward of Planet Earth, which is why the hot-button issues of clean energy and recycling both have me flummoxed lately.

Clean energy has been in the news recently because apparently more and more citizens - including those in our own valley - favor the idea of nuclear power as a clean source of energy for our future.

But with many issues regarding our environment (including nuclear energy), there's always a flip side that makes you wonder if you're on the right side of the issue or not.

For example, while nuclear energy is much better for our air quality than burning fossil fuels is, it does have a nasty habit of producing radioactive waste. This includes Plutonium 239, which has a half-life of 24,000 years, and which must be disposed of somewhere. Kings Waste, perhaps? Probably not.

Another clean source of power is hydroelectric power, but in order to have that, most of the time you have to dam a river (destroying a wild habitat) or flood a natural valley, in order to provide the logistics necessary to spin turbines and create electricity.

Wind power? Wonderful, except for the significant avian die-offs that occur when raptors and other winged creatures come in contact with the giant spinning fans.

And of course regular power plants have always been problematic. The Intermountain Power Project in Utah has a reputation as one of the "cleanest" power plants in the nation because it burns coal rather than gas and uses state-of-the-art scrubbers to clean the air it emits. And yet the mining operations which produce the coal create a nature-destroying eyesore.

Confused yet?

I even think about it locally. Is the Super Wal-Mart actually "green" because folks aren't driving to Fresno or Visalia as often, thereby reducing air pollution? Or do the trucks bringing in the goods we buy there create more dirty air than is offset by the traffic reduction?

Would the benefits of city-wide curbside recycling negate the air pollution caused by the garbage trucks making another run during the week? What about the trucks transferring all the recycled plastic, aluminum and glass to wherever it goes to be made into something new? How much pollution is caused by that?

Even the hybrid car I've been considering buying has drawbacks. Sure, it runs cleaner, but right now there is no recycling the special batteries it uses. This means the batteries are eventually carted off as hazardous waste to some dreadful storage facility, where I guess it keeps company with the Plutonium 239 and refuse from other "clean" technologies.

So what's a concerned citizen to do? I predict that is going to be one of the biggest ethical challenges we face in the 21st century.

We can only hope there is hard, black-and-white science which can point us in the right direction as we weigh the decisions which will determine the kind of world our children are going to live in. But if the comparative data's here now, I sure haven't seen it. And I would really like some way of knowing if I'm backing the right idea, or making the right choice with these issues.

It all makes my head spin. And if I was any kind of decent "tree hugging environmentalist," right now I'd be heading into the back yard to see if any of my trees would give me a hug instead today. I could use one about now.

Diane Sayre is a freelance writer living in Hanford.

[Letters to the N.Y. Times, Tuesday, April 24, 2007:](#)

\$8 Fee for Cars? Bravo, or Fuhgeddaboutit!

Re “Bloomberg Draws a 25-Year Blueprint for a Greener City” (news article, April 23):

To the Editor:

I applaud and admire Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg for his leadership in proposing an \$8-a-day congestion fee for drivers in New York. It's about time that government in this country, whether on a national, state or local level, took the initiative by preparing us all for proactive, perhaps drastic, measures to protect our environment.

Brave, progressive reform like this is what we all must adapt to sooner than later, so bravo to Mr. Bloomberg for taking this important step.

Chris Sharp, Brooklyn

To the Editor:

Much as I applaud Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's sincere concern about the environment and much as I applaud many of his other proposals, this proposal is tantamount to a regressive tax. The wealthy will be able to afford this tax, but the poor will not.

In addition, if trucking and delivery services increase their charges to cover the congestion fee, this will also be felt by the poor and by those on fixed incomes disproportionate to the wealthy.

Perhaps the fee should be leveled only on luxury vehicles and on cars with a sticker price of more than \$20,000. And Town Cars and limousines.

Nina Keneally, Stratford, Conn

To the Editor:

As a longtime yellow-taxi driver, I congratulate the mayor on this forward-looking plan that includes far more than a surcharge.

The plan envisions a greener, more mass-transit-friendly New York City, a city that just might be showing the way for the cities of the world to follow.

The plan envisions a New York in which finally the transportation infrastructure will be more modern, more efficient, cleaner and safer.

Eugene Weixel, New York

To the Editor:

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's Earth Day announcement indicating his support for a congestion tax will probably prove to be one of the most important in New York's history. Individually owned cars are one of the leading causes of poor health in the metropolitan area, taking a toll not just in terms of accidents, but also in terms of noise pollution and air pollution.

What's more, nondrivers have to pay hefty fees in the form of medical care, road repairs, higher mass transit fees, longer cab rides and higher retail prices in stores (those delivery trucks can't get through).

A congestion tax will clean the air, fatten our wallets and decongest our lungs.

Peter Muennig, M.D., New York

The writer is an assistant professor at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University.

To the Editor:

If the average New Yorker can afford \$8 to drive in Manhattan to fight congestion, the rich can do without their obscene stretch limos, and cabs should be barred from operating on any street or avenue on which a bus line runs or on any street or avenue on which there is subway service, below 125th Street.

Let's be democratic.

The city should require the installation of E-ZPass or OnStar-type trackers on every vehicle and divide the entire city into zones about one mile square.

As you drive, the tracker records how many zone lines you have crossed, and like E-ZPass, your credit card is billed 50 cents each time you cross a zone.

Why should Manhattan bill Queens and Brooklyn, unless Queens and Brooklyn and the Bronx can bill Nassau and Suffolk?

But let's start with the rich.

Sheldon Bunin, Jackson Heights, Queens