

Around Tulare: Barwick appointed to Valley air board

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, Dec. 3, 2011

Tulare Vice Mayor Skip Barwick was named earlier this week to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Governing Board.

Barwick was one of four new members appointed to the board: Others were Fresno Councilman Oliver Baines III, Madera Councilwoman Sally Bomprezzi and Bakersfield Councilman Harold Hanson.

The Valleywide City Selection Committee, meeting on Tuesday, made the three-year appointments, which take effect next month.

Earlier last month, Gov. Jerry Brown appointed Dr. Alexander Sherriffs of Fowler, to the governing board.

"The Air District Board members and staff welcome these new members. They are all great additions to the governing board, and will bring new perspectives and leadership to the important work being done to improve the quality of life of all Valley residents," said Tulare County Supervisor Steve Worthley, Governing Board chair.

Election district boundaries meeting

The second of four meetings to discuss the boundaries for the potential electoral district is set for 6 p.m. Thursday at the Claude Meitzenheimer Community Center, 830 South Blackstone St.

The meetings are part of a settlement agreement in a lawsuit filed earlier this year seeking council members elected in a by-area district instead of an open election.

Representatives from the National Demographics Corporation will lead the meeting. At a previous meeting, four potential maps were discussed.

City officials said residents' participation and contributions will be welcomed.

Information: www.ci.tulare.ca.us, click on District Election/Boundary Information

Measure C: Fresno bus system stalls under tax decline

By Russell Clemings

Fresno Bee, Sunday, December 4, 2011

Riding a Fresno bus often means a long wait and trouble finding a seat. In other words, not much has changed.

It wasn't supposed to be like that.

Measure C, Fresno County's half-cent transportation sales tax, promised better bus service when voters ratified its 20-year extension in 2006.

Today, in a crippled economy, the measure yields far less money than expected. Promises have been cast aside, at least for now.

It's a vivid contrast to the boom years. Back then, a committee drawn from local governments and community groups wrote the extension plan and set aside 20 cents of each Measure C dollar to support bus systems in Fresno, Clovis and rural Fresno County.

Measure C was supposed to be the tax to fix what ailed Fresno County's transportation system. But five years after voters approved a 20-year extension, the tax is failing to do what it promised.

Among the promised benefits: Buses every 15 minutes on the busiest routes, free rides for people older than 65, and new bus routes in underserved suburban areas.

So great was the promise of that new funding stream that Fresno city officials decided to start early. They got \$11.1 million in federal grants to begin 15-minute service on four FAX routes that were standing-room only with 30-minute service.

"I think everybody believed we were going to see a lot of money rolling in and we were going to be able to make some big changes," said John Downs, FAX planning division manager.

The good times didn't last. When the bottom fell out of the economy in 2008, sales tax collections -- including Measure C -- tumbled as well. Now, the measure is projected to yield almost 30% less revenue than was expected when the extension plan was written in 2005.

For Fresno's FAX system, that means \$164.5 million over 20 years instead of \$235 million. For Clovis, it's \$23.6 million instead of \$33.7 million. For the rest of the county's bus systems, there's \$47.9 million instead of \$68.4 million.

And that -- along with parallel cuts in sales tax-driven transit funding from state government -- means much of the promise of Measure C for public transit has been unfulfilled.

Vidal Medina, who cannot drive because he is legally blind, rides the bus every day to his job as independent living specialist at a social-service organization called Resources for Independence. He says Measure C hasn't improved transit at all for him.

"Today, I still walk a mile to the bus stop. It still takes me an hour and 15 minutes to get to work. If the bus is overloaded or running late, you can add a half-hour to that," he said.

Complaints like those were a driving force behind the Measure C plan's increased emphasis on transit.

Better transit was billed as a way to reduce air pollution by getting people out of their cars, and relieve unemployment by making it easier for people to get to their jobs.

Measure C funding, it was promised, would make buses more attractive by putting more of them on the busiest routes to reduce travel times and ease overcrowding. And for a while, with an assist from the federal government, that's what it did.

Fresno's experiment with buses at 15-minute intervals began in October 2005 on Blackstone Avenue's Route 30 and expanded one month later to Route 28 on Kings Canyon Road. Route 38 on Cedar Avenue was added in January 2007 and Route 34 on First Street the following June, just before the new Measure C took effect on July 1, 2007.

All four routes previously had buses every 30 minutes. So the change doubled the number of buses on each route and cut maximum waiting times by half. For the first two years, the federal grants covered the costs. Measure C was supposed to pick up after that.

Kern County spared worst of wind conditions Thursday

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Dec. 2, 2011

Strong winds were reported over numerous Central Valley counties, knocking down trees and branches and power lines and blowing dust and debris everywhere, the California Highway Patrol reported Thursday afternoon.

Kern County, however, appeared to have been spared the worst of the weather.

CHP Officer Robert Shuck, of the Fort Tejon office, said conditions were a bit gusty at the Grapevine, but there was no dust and traffic had been moving steadily all day. The wind wasn't too bad until south of the Pyramid Lake area.

National Weather Service meteorologist Modesto Vasquez said there were some gusty conditions in mountainous areas such as Frazier Park and Pine Mountain Club, but overall there weren't unusually strong winds in Kern County.

Local air officials were nevertheless cautioning residents to be careful because winds could increase and produce areas of blowing dust, resulting in unhealthy concentrations of particulate matter, according to a San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District news release.

People with heart or lung diseases should follow their doctors' advice for dealing with episodes of unhealthy air quality, the news release said. Older adults and children, as well as everyone else, should avoid prolonged exposure, strenuous activities or heavy exertion.

Officers urged motorists to slow down and drive cautiously in windy conditions, and, if possible, to delay trips until harsh weather passes.

Call 800-GAS-ROAD for the latest travel conditions.

EPA eases boiler rule; health benefits unchanged

By Dina Capiello, Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee and Fresno Bee, Friday, Dec. 02, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Facing criticism from industry and lawmakers, the Obama administration on Friday proposed easing rules aimed at reducing toxic air pollution from industrial boilers and incinerators.

But administration officials maintained that the health benefits of the regulation wouldn't be compromised.

"We have found a way to get better protections, lower emissions and lower costs as well," said the Environmental Protection Agency's top air pollution official, Gina McCarthy. In a conference call with reporters, McCarthy said the agency had found the "sweet spot" since issuing the final rule under a court-ordered deadline in March.

That "spot is affordable, practical regulations that provide the vital and long overdue health benefits that Americans demand and deserve," she said.

The changes would require pollution controls at the 5,500 largest and most polluting boilers nationwide, such as those at refineries and chemical plants. An additional 195,000 smaller boilers would be able to meet the rule through routine tune-ups.

The bulk of boilers nationwide - about 1.3 million - would not be covered by the rule, since they are too small and emit too little pollution to warrant controls.

The tweaks are the latest for a rule that has undergone numerous revisions and has been among the most criticized by industry and lawmakers for its cost and its scope. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., has said the boiler rule has "come from another planet," even as he has defended the agency in the face of other Republican rollbacks.

Alexander, in a statement Friday, said he was pleased efforts on Capitol Hill "spurred" the agency to make changes. But he said he would review the regulations to make sure the pollution reductions are technically feasible and there was enough time for businesses to comply.

The agency had already found ways to cut the cost of compliance in half, by about \$1.8 billion, when it announced the final rule in March, promising future revisions.

On Friday, some industry groups still were not satisfied.

Jay Timmons, president and CEO of the National Association of Manufacturers, said in a statement that the boiler rules would still do significant harm to job growth.

"We will continue to urge the EPA to extend the compliance time frame and consider a more reasonable approach to setting the emission standards to ensure additional jobs are not put at risk," he said.

The American Chemistry Council, which represents chemical companies, pressed for legislation to delay the rules while acknowledging improvements had been made.

The Republican-controlled House passed a bill in October seeking to delay the boiler regulation and lower the threshold that boiler operators would have to meet from "maximum achievable" pollution control to the "least burdensome." A bipartisan bill pending in the Senate would give the EPA additional time to rewrite the rule and for industry to comply.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, the sponsor of the Senate measure, said Friday that the changes were a step in the right direction. But she said she needed to review the details before determining if they were sufficient.

Industrial boilers burn coal and other fuels to generate steam and hot water for heat and electricity. They're the nation's second-largest source of mercury emissions, a potent neurotoxin, after coal-fired power plants. But boilers are among a handful of pollution sources that still have no standards for toxic emissions.