

REXPO focuses on business, recycling in Stockton

Stockton Record, Thursday, March 8, 2012

Improving the regional environment - both in terms of cleaning the air and water as well as strengthening the economy and job market - is the aim of REXPO 8 Unplugged, the annual recycling, conservation and trade show planned for Wednesday in Stockton.

California EPA Secretary Matt Rodriguez will give the keynote luncheon talk, and state Assemblywoman Kristen Olsen, a Modesto Republican, is the day's opening speaker.

There will also be two panel discussions. One will focus on efforts to increase recycled-content manufacturing in California, while the second seeks a balance between improving the environment while also creating new business opportunities.

The event's "unplugged" theme suggests two ideas, said Frank Ferral, public policy director for the Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce, which is organizing REXPO, short for recycling exposition.

First is simple energy efficiency: unplugging appliances, office equipment, phone chargers and other electronics when not in use. Many devices continue to use small amounts of electricity while plugged in, even when "asleep" or dormant, increasing power bills while contributing to air pollution.

Second is the apparent disconnect in state policy priorities, Ferral said.

For example, California leaders talk about attracting and developing business to create jobs but miss key opportunities, such as encouraging recycled-materials manufacturing. Eighty percent or more of recycled materials generated in California now leave the state before they are converted to new materials or uses.

"Where are the efforts from Sacramento to really invest in recycled-materials manufacturing?" Ferral asked.

Such programs would not only generate jobs, they would help reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions generated in transporting the materials out of state, he said. "Let's put those incentives in place to keep it in California instead of exporting it out of state along with our jobs, our tax base and our commerce."

REXPO 8 Unplugged will run from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Hilton Stockton, at 2323 Grand Canal Blvd.

Attendance to the trade show and panel discussions is free, but organizers ask people to register in advance online at greenteamsanjoaquin.com.

Admission to the luncheon is \$30. For more information, contact Ferral at (209) 547-2763.

Static electricity

Plug-in technology struggling to catch on with Valley drivers

By Alex Breitler, staff writer

Stockton Record, Monday, March 12, 2012

STOCKTON - Driving her brand-new car down Pacific Avenue, Catherine Kearney turned into a gas station.

Only to remember – with a "whoops" and a laugh – that she would never need gas again.

Kearney's Nissan Leaf is refueled each day while it sits in a parking spot near her desk at the San Joaquin County Office of Education, which recently installed five charging stations for plug-in electric vehicles.

They are among the first free public chargers in the county.

"It gives me great joy to drive past gas stations," Kearney said Friday.

Earlier this year, the state approved new rules requiring 1.4 million zero-emission, alternative-energy vehicles on the road by 2025. With gas at \$4.26 per gallon in Stockton, you'd think there will be plenty of takers.

But that bleeding edge is awfully sharp.

Battery-powered cars still cost more up front; their range is limited; and in the San Joaquin Valley, at least, charging stations like the new ones off Arch-Airport Road are hard to come by.

The few chargers that do exist are not exactly gas-and-go. It can take four to eight hours for a full charge.

That's why Kearney keeps a book in her car and plans for extended breaks when she travels beyond the 100-mile range of her battery.

"I am willing to be inconvenienced," said Kearney, who bought the car in part because she's concerned about Valley air pollution. "We know that the infrastructure is still being built, but somebody has to go first. If we want this to be a viable option, there have to be people who are willing."

Some thought 2011 would mark the mainstreaming of the electric car, with the Leaf and the plug-in hybrid Chevy Volt (which burns gasoline to supplement battery power). Nissan says Leaf sales met expectations, but Chevrolet will temporarily suspend production of the Volt later this month.

The cars appear to have been especially slow catching on in the Valley.

Just 72 car buyers from Stockton to Bakersfield are among the more than 5,000 buyers in California who have taken advantage of a state rebate, according to a San Diego-based nonprofit California Center for Sustainable Energy.

Most people still like the concept of an electric car, according to surveys. But they're worried about battery range, charge time and the extra initial cost.

A new Leaf costs \$35,200 – though rebates and tax credits of as much as \$13,000 are available at the federal, state and local levels, and the energy cost of each 100-mile charge is only \$2.75.

The San Diego-based center is hosting a series of public workshops to demystify the electric car, including one meeting in Fresno later this month.

"This is really new stuff, and people don't know it yet. We're trying to provide answers," said David Almeida, the center's plug-in electric vehicle program manager.

He's also working with cities and counties in the Valley over the next two years to build up charging stations in public places.

Ultimately, however, the Valley is mostly bereft of charging stations, because it's mostly bereft of electric cars.

"We're trying to set it up so we don't have a chicken-and-egg situation where suddenly we have all these charging stations and there aren't any cars, or we have all these cars and there aren't any charging stations," said David Clegern, a spokesman for the California Air Resources Board.

About 80 percent of electric-car charging happens at home, he said. Public chargers are a lower priority, therefore, than building new fueling stations for hydrogen cars, for example.

The county Office of Education chargers are attached to a new solar array helping to power the complex. So on a sunny day, when Kearney charges her car, that fuel is direct from the sun – rather than some polluting power plant.

The \$2.5 million project was financed mostly through low-interest loans. Energy savings will eventually pay it off, said Barry Scott, the county office energy coordinator.

Kearney hopes people driving on nearby Highway 99 will stop by and plug in – if not for a complete charge, at least to "top off" for a few minutes. The office has a café, she said with a smile.

"They can have a sandwich, get a few electrons and be on their way," Kearney said.

Former hospital property undergoes asbestos cleanup

by Jonathan Partridge

Patterson Irrigator, Friday, March 9, 2012

Less than five months after the former Del Puerto Hospital building was boarded up because of vandalism, the property continues to suffer blight, with asbestos materials from inside the building littering the ground behind it in recent weeks.

This week, a cleanup crew began wetting down the material, which is known to cause diseases, and sealing up the building on E Street, after the city of Patterson cited Sacramento-based property manager Red Shield Servicing regarding the mess late last month.

It's just the latest of a handful of nuisance abatement citations at the former hospital property, which also was the site of an interior fire this past summer. Neighbors say it appears the culprits were extracting copper wire from the building, and clothing left on the premises seems to indicate that people were living on the property up until recently.

"Obviously, it's a continual nuisance," said Hugo Rayo, code enforcement officer for the city of Patterson, while noting that vacant buildings often are targets for vandals.

In addition to calling for Red Shield to abate the property by Monday, March 12, the city contacted the county's Department of Environmental Resources, which contacted the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District. A valley air district representative inspected the site Feb. 27 to test it for asbestos, and sent a notice Feb. 28 mandating that Red Shield Services remove the debris.

On Feb. 29, the district contacted Red Shield, recommending that the site be secured and that abatement take place as soon as possible, valley air district spokeswoman Jaime Holt said. Mesa Environmental Services was awarded a contract to remove the asbestos and began cleaning up the property Wednesday, March 7, she said.

Vandalism has been an on-again, off-again problem at the property for the past two years, Rayo said. The city notified Red Shield in June that debris was found on the property, and someone burned old furniture and other items inside the building in July, Rayo said.

Red Shield, which works on behalf of a group of investors who own the building, addressed some of those nuisance complaints by boarding up the building in October.

Del Puerto Hospital closed in the spring of 1998 after 48 years of operation. The former hospital property sits directly between Patterson Ambulance Company's headquarters and Sutter Gould Medical Foundation's Patterson Care Center. A portion of the property is directly behind a play yard at Las Palmas Elementary School.

The building was used as a drug rehabilitation facility and a meeting place for The Living Center, a drug rehabilitation center that shut down in 2008 after the property went into foreclosure. Several investors are listed on the property deed signed in December 2007.

A relative of one of the owners, who spoke on condition of anonymity this week, said that Red Shield's president, Ron Bieber, organized the investors from various cities to refinance a loan on the building when it was still being operated by The Living Center. They had no intention of buying the building, she said, and they ended up acquiring it when previous owner Troy Dorman, who ran The Living Center, defaulted on the loan.

At least two of those investors have since died. The relative said that to her knowledge, the families who own the building do not know one another, and Bieber is calling the shots.

"At this point, legally I don't know what I can do," she said. "We're kind of hanging out in the wind."

Bieber said by phone earlier this week that his company does not own the property. He did not return calls later this week after the Irrigator learned that Red Shield manages the property. The property's caretaker, Bob Crone, also could not be reached for comment.

A cleanup crew sealed off the property with caution tape this week and posted notices that asbestos was on the property.

Chad Vargas, CEO of the Del Puerto Health Care District, which runs the ambulance district and a health center in west Patterson and has its central offices right next door, expressed concern about potential safety hazards. He noted that a representative from the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District stopped by last week, and he has since urged his workers to avoid parking in the lot directly next to the property.

Fibers found in asbestos — the name given to a group of natural minerals used in building supplies, brake pads and various other materials known for heat resistance — can cause serious lung ailments if inhaled.

Long-term exposure to serpentine asbestos, the most common form of asbestos which appears in chrysotile, can result in lung cancer or asbestosis — the scarring of the lining of the lungs, according to Mike Sharp, owner of Modesto-based Hazard Management Services.

Even short-term exposure to amphibole types of asbestos, commonly used in pipe wrap, can cause mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer related specifically to asbestos, Sharp said. However, mesothelioma symptoms typically take 10 to 40 years to show up, he said.

Sharp, who is also an instructor at University of California, Berkeley's Center for Occupational and Environmental Health, said it was hard to say without having more details whether people who work, live and play nearby could suffer harmful effects if they were upwind of those materials. However, he said the asbestos certainly is not proving them any benefit.

"It may not be doing them any harm, but it's not doing them any good," he said.

Concerns easier to address

By Rebecca Plevin, Vida en el Valle
Vida En El Valle, Wednesday, March 7, 2012

BAKERSFIELD -- Teresa De Anda recalls the afternoon when she tried to make a formal complaint about the dangerous mixture of poor air quality and pesticides, and its impact on her children's health.

The polluted San Joaquín Valley air was particularly hard to breathe that day, and a grower was spraying pesticides on the fields near her Earlimart home. That combination, she said, caused her children to return from school, sluggish and sick.

"All the kids around were dragging -- it was kind of squashing them with the weight of the air, and the pollutants in the air," De Anda said.

She said she first tried to report the problem to the San Joaquín Valley Air Pollution Control District. But in a case of bureaucratic hot potato, she was referred to the Department of Pesticide Regulation, then the state Air Resources Board, and then the Kern County Agricultural Commissioner.

"Who do I call to tell this guy not to spray when the air quality is so bad?" De Anda remembers pleading. "My kids are getting sick -- they are getting headaches, their noses are all messed up, throat infections, ear infections."

Years later, De Anda, and the organization she works for, Californians for Pesticide Reform, are launching a program intended to make it easier for residents to report environmental problems, and for agencies to investigate issues, and enforce existing environmental laws.

Through the Kern Environmental Enforcement Network, which is modeled after a successful program in Imperial County, area residents will be able to make environmental complaints via text

message, on the program's website, or by telephone. A taskforce of community members and representatives of local and state agencies will review the reports, which could spur investigations and possible penalties.

The Kern County network, which is funded by grants from the federal Environmental Protection Agency and The California Endowment, is expected to launch next month.

In agricultural Kern County, which boasts the most polluted air in the country, the program is intended to break down the barriers that prevent residents from reporting -- and agencies from investigating -- environmental issues. Community members might not report environmental hazards if they don't know which agency to call, are afraid to report an issue, or can't communicate with agencies. Meanwhile, a limited number of local and state investigators struggle to identify the environmental issues in every community.

Through the new program, "you are the community environmental police," regional EPA administrator Jared Blumenfeld said to a handful of residents last Wednesday, during a meeting in Lamont to establish the network's taskforce. "That is your job -- you are the eyes and ears for all of our agencies."

And with the community's input, agencies will be able to more efficiently and effectively investigate community concerns, said Brian Johnson, deputy director of enforcement and emergency response for the state Department of Toxic Substances Control.

"It helps me focus our resources in the very specific locations where we need to be, when we need to be there," he said.

In its first two years, the Imperial County program -- Imperial Visions Action Network -- has achieved these goals. The program has generated 44 reported violations, resulting in \$90,000 in penalties. Some of those funds have supported local community improvement projects. Given the Imperial program's success, the Kern network could be the first of many similar projects throughout the state. Community groups from other parts of the Valley -- including Fresno, Tulare, Kings and Madera counties -- have also expressed interest in launching similar projects.

"It would make great sense to replicate programs like the (Kern Environmental Enforcement Network) in those communities that are interested in participating in solutions toward a cleaner, healthier community," Arsenio Mataka, assistant secretary for environmental justice for the California Environmental Protection Agency, said in an e-mail.

Last Wednesday, during a bus tour of Kern County communities, residents began sharing with representatives from local, state and federal agencies their environmental concerns -- the types of issues that could soon be reported, and then investigated, through the network. Outside of a Lamont-area trailer park community, Beatriz Campos, of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, pointed out a pipe that spouts a mysterious black foam around midnight between April and November. The foam turns into a hard, lava-like rock, and has a horrible odor, she said. The smell is so strong, she said, that residents avoid using their swamp coolers during the sweltering summer, so they don't pull the stench into their homes.

"We don't know what it is," Campos said. "I know that it is really black, and I know that it smells really bad, but we don't know what are the effects on the community, and what are the health effects."

By reporting similar situations through the network, residents can help improve environmental justice in their communities, said Blumenfeld, of the EPA.

"Accountability only comes with information," he said. "You provide the information, we provide the accountability."

The future of the environmental justice movement, he said, will involve "getting equity through accountability."

[Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Friday, March 9, 2012:](#)

Just a little breeze of brightness but we'll take it

By Lois Henry, Californian Columnist

A couple of updates from the good news (sort of) department.

Harris Ranch and the California Air Resources Board (CARB) have reached an agreement on the now infamous seven trucks that were torched by criminals two months ago..

The agreement still calls for Harris to buy seven old, pollution belching trucks in order to get grant money to replace the trucks that were burned up.

But the beef company won't have to actually operate the beater trucks.

Sigh. I shall pause for the head-shaking to settle.

Both Harris and Seyed Sadredin, director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District shrugged and said it was the best deal they could get.

Well, I still say it's arbitrary, unfair and, frankly, just plain dumb.

It also tells me CARB is more interested in getting its way at almost any cost rather than working cooperatively and innovatively to attain the supposed goal -- better air quality.

For those who need to catch up, here's some background.

The "Harris 7" as I'm now calling the burned up trucks, had been approved for replacement with the help of state grant money by the San Joaquin air district.

Since CARB now mandates how long companies can operate their trucks in the name of air quality, the state offers a small carrot in the form of grant money.

Truckers apply for the grants, between \$50,000 to \$65,000, about half the cost of a new truck, and if they qualify, they then turn in their old trucks which the state destroys.

CARB oversees the grant money, but local air districts process the trucker applications and work directly with companies to replace the trucks.

The Harris 7 were approved for the replacement grants last year. Before any money could change hands, however, criminals snuck onto the Harris feed lot near Coalinga and burned them to the ground.

A few days later, CARB told the Air District to rescind its approval and deny Harris the grants.

The trucks had been destroyed, no longer befouling the air so, therefore, they didn't merit the grant money, according to CARB.

Air District director Sadredin argued that was unfair.

CARB relented a bit and said it would allow the grants if Harris bought seven substitute trucks -- no matter how old and polluting -- and operated them for the ensuing two to six months while the grant paperwork was completed and then gave those to the state to be destroyed.

Sadredin was appalled.

First, it was victimizing the victim again by making them spend extra money to get the grants they had already been approved for.

Second, and more importantly, forcing the company to run crummy trucks in the valley for two to six months particularly at the start of ozone season, was flat unconscionable, Sadredin argued.

OK, CARB said, grudgingly.

Now, Harris will still have to buy the junker trucks. But they won't have to run them. Then at the end of the two to six months, Harris must hand the junkers over to the state for destruction.

Oh brother.

Harris' transportation manager, Patrick Smith, sounded resigned when I spoke with him.

"We're hoping some good comes of this and maybe having the rules better defined will benefit others in the future who have their vehicles stolen or totaled in an accident," he said.

Eh, I have a feeling unless Sadredin and I are there to browbeat them, CARB won't change a thing if they don't have to.

Which is why I encourage everyone to call your state senators and urge them to support AB 1095, a bi-partisan bill that would establish an independent appeals hearing board for CARB.

Currently, if you have a beef with how CARB enforces its rules (ahem!) your only recourse is to sue. All the local air districts have appeals boards. It cuts down on court costs and both environmentalists and industry have said it's a logical, helpful step.

The bill passed the Assembly with flying colors and is now stalled in the Senate Natural Resources Committee.

Oh, and CARB hates AB1095, so what more do you need to know?

Good news update No. 2.

I wrote last month about how Houchin Community Blood Bank got "caught" for having an emergency generator at its G Street location that didn't have proper permits from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Never mind that the generator had been in place more than three decades (11 years before the air district was even formed, by the by) and had zero wayward emissions. Once the air district discovered it, the game was on.

The air district fired off a letter to Houchin director Greg Gallion saying while it could fine the non-profit up to \$10,000 per day per violation, it would "settle" for \$1,836 in back fees and penalties.

Gallion argued that since no one knew it was supposed to be permitted all these years, he shouldn't pay a penalty.

The air district quickly lowered its demand to \$1,200.

That's when I got involved and said the whole thing smacked of extortion.

Just charge Houchin the permit fee from here on out and move on, for goodness sake.

Well, the upshot is, the district agreed to go down to \$1,000 for permit fees going back to 2009 when the district says Houchin should have known to get the old generator permitted as it was in the process of getting a new emergency generator permitted for its Truxtun Avenue location.

Living by the adage of gettin' out while the gettin' was good, Gallion agreed.

"The check's in the mail!" he told me.

And that concludes today's "good news" update.

