

Car-poolers play hide and seek

By Julissa McKinnon, Modesto Bee staff writer

Monday, March 29, 2004

For some car-pooling commuters, finding parking every morning has turned into a stealth operation.

Just ask 14 Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory employees who commute together from Modesto. Every morning they embark on the same mission: urban camouflage.

They scatter their cars among the others in the big-box store lots near the Pelandale Avenue interchange at Highway 99.

They load and unload quickly and quietly into and out of a nondescript gray van within one or two minutes.

Their main objective is avoiding store management, lest they get asked to leave or, worse yet, towed, said Art Grajeda, holding a lunch cooler in one hand, his keys in the other.

"We have to be low-key, incognito. We can't stick out like a sore thumb," Grajeda said as his fellow van-poolers scattered to their cars around 5:30 p.m. Thursday and drove away.

This group likes to keep its parking plan secret.

"If other vans come here, it'll become a hub, and we'll all get kicked out," Grajeda said.

"We're like the wandering hoard," Mary Judkins giggled.

But while these van-poolers joke about their James Bond-like approach to parking, they also seriously question why there's not better support for car pools in a region with the second-worst air pollution in the United States. Only Los Angeles has dirtier air and higher ozone levels than the San Joaquin Valley.

But even as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency pressured valley officials to reduce air pollution, the number of dedicated park-and-ride spots in Stanislaus County did not keep up with population growth.

For two decades, Vintage Faire Mall along Highway 99 in Modesto has furnished the bulk of car-pool parking in the county -- 225 spaces at the northwest corner of the mall parking lot. The free parking comes with the mall's security patrol.

Fifteen spaces in Turlock, at Highway 99 and Fulkerth Road, brought the county total to 240, a 6.7 percent increase over the past 20 years.

During half of that time, from 1990 to 2000, the county's population grew 20.6 percent, from 370,522 to 446,997, according to Census Bureau data.

Now the county is about to lose the Vintage Faire park-and-ride lot, as the mall takes the space for a restaurant.

Steve Mayo, a regional planner in charge of replacing the mall's car-pool parking, said the Stanislaus Council of Governments received \$16,200 in state funding in 2003-04 to lease car-pool parking from businesses at \$5 per space per month.

That barely covers the cost of the extra wear and tear on the pavement, he explained.

Nonetheless, some businesses are sharing their spaces:

Seventy-five spots are available Monday through Friday at the Pentecostal Revivalist Center, at Seventh and I streets in downtown Modesto.

Fifty car-pool spots are open behind the Denny's restaurant at 4324 Salida Blvd. near the Pelandale Avenue interchange.

Livermore van-pool members said the downtown Modesto lot is too far from the freeway. And they don't expect to find room in the lot behind Denny's.

They said they rarely ever scored parking in Vintage Faire Mall's park-and-ride lot.

Car-poolers can be a nuisance

Meanwhile, managers of big-box stores near the Pelandale interchange say the van-poolers' cars have become a nuisance.

Save Mart manager Gary Rector said that when his store's business peaks between 3 and 8 p.m., customers easily fill his store's two- to three-acre lot. If van-poolers continually ignore polite requests to bypass the Save Mart lot, Rector said, he will consider calling in two trucks.

Many stores are reluctant to share their parking because they fear liability issues, despite the fact that the California Department of Transportation provides insurance, according to Mayo.

Other companies simply don't want to deal with the hassle, he said.

Using public money to build a park-and-ride lot near the freeway is out of reach of cash-strapped state and local government, Mayo added.

Building just one lot would probably bust Stanislaus County's \$121,000 "commute connection" budget for 2003-04. This money funds car-pool parking, bus connections between Modesto and the Bay Area Rapid Transit station in Dublin-Pleasanton, and the Altamont Commuter Express depot in Manteca-Lathrop.

For now, leasing space from businesses remains the only viable way to acquire more car-pool parking, Mayo said.

"Cleaner air" and "helping the community" typically aren't good enough incentives for businesses to share parking or for people to car-pool, he said. Companies and people are both looking for more tangible incentives, such as tax breaks, he said.

"It's not convenient, so many people don't think to do it (car-pool). It's much easier to just jump in the car and turn the key. We're Californians, and we love our cars," Mayo said. "Honestly, people aren't going to change their driving behavior until gas starts hitting \$4 or \$5 a gallon."

Air Quality Issues Focus At Ag Luncheon

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San Joaquin Valley's congested air quality came to Oakdale Friday in form other than the air itself that locals breathe, as it was the focus of discussion at the Chamber of Commerce 31st Annual Ag Luncheon & Trade Show at the Gene Bianchi Community Center.

Speaking to a sold-out crowd in the hall encircled by agricultural displays sponsored by familiar names such as Con Agra Foods (Hunts) and Burchell Nursery, among other familiar ag-related businesses, Dave Mitchell addressed the valley's non-attainment status under the Federal Clean Air Act.

Mitchell, who is planning manager for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, provided a detailed report on what agricultural sources add to air pollution in the valley, the legislation that applies to it, and how the district intends to help ag-business meet pollution requirements.

The hot days and stagnant weather conditions that the San Joaquin Valley has been experiencing during the past several weeks is an example of the concerns the district has related to agriculture, where dust from farming practices, exhaust from machinery and animal emissions contribute to producing poor air quality.

Central to controlling air pollution is monitoring through the Air Quality Index (AQI), which measures the particulate matter contained within a quantity of air. Mitchell stressed the federal nonattainment status of the valley for fine particulate matter (PM10) and ozone, and threatened

Environmental Protection Agency sanctions unless a permitting program is implemented for agriculture that controls PM10 from ag sources.

Particulate matter is measured in microns, with matter that is 2.5 microns and smaller (PM2.5) capable of triggering asthma flares and heart attacks when inhaled. Other health conditions are also associated with breathing higher-than-normal concentrations of ammonia nitrate, carbon and other small particles suspended in air. It can lead to lung ailments such as bronchitis, and exacerbate existing lung conditions.

Mitchell pointed out several areas now legislated under Senate Bill 700 where the APCD is directed to address agricultural pollution. These include contributions to nonattainment status through fine particulate matter (PM10), or dust control, animal emissions and machinery, particularly diesel engine contributions.

He outlined permitting measures and timelines within which controls will be put in place to meet the air pollution standards.

The agency manager also pointed out the immensity of the mission that they have to accomplish, noting that there are 28,000 farms in the valley and 5,500 cattle facilities, of which 4,000 farms and 350 cattle facilities are subject to permits.

In approaching the mission, Mitchell said that grower input would be involved, including proposals for new measures and providing a handbook of adopted measures.

Some practical practices for control were pointed out by the director, such as protecting the soil from wind erosion, equipment modifications to physically produce less PM10, applying water or dust suppressants to reduce emissions when equipment is moved, reducing speed or access on unpaved roads, and alternative practices to waste burning.

A silent auction was part of the day's events, with proceeds benefiting ag scholarships. Lunch was catered by Medlen's House of Beef and served by Oakdale High School Future Farmers of America students. Local merchants and agri-business made donations, and the FFA students did decorations.

The event was put together by the Oakdale Chamber of Commerce Ag Luncheon Committee. Serving this year were Christina Kisler, Albert Conlin, Liza Cotton-Gilbert, John Herlihy, Steve Knell, Donna Lee-Nation and Brian Stewart.

Representatives from area legislative offices were in attendance. The Chamber staff includes Chief Executive Officer Mary Guardiola, Dora White and Sharon Ball. Chamber President Jerry Jones gave a special note of thanks to participants and sponsors for the event.

The Clean Air Act: At what cost?

Oil firms, Sierra Club want waiver for state on adding ethanol to gas

By Mark Glover -- Sacramento Bee Auto Editor
Published 2:15 a.m. PST Sunday, March 28, 2004

With gasoline topping \$2 a gallon and fears of more price spikes ahead, California is eagerly awaiting a decision on its request for a federal waiver of a clean-air mandate the state believes contributes to unstable fuel prices.

And "state" is a nearly all-inclusive word when it comes to those who object to the Clean Air Act mandate that a percentage of fuel sold in smoggy areas contain oxygenated compounds.

The coalition that wants the Bush administration to waive the gas-additive requirement for California includes an eclectic combination of groups and individuals not usually seen on the same page when it comes to environmental issues. The chorus includes Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Sierra Club, the California Environmental Protection Agency, the American Automobile Association and oil companies.

In a Jan. 28 letter to federal EPA Administrator Michael Leavitt, Schwarzenegger requested a waiver of the minimum oxygen content mandate, saying it "slows environmental improvement,

raises costs and is no longer required to ensure substantial and sustained ethanol use in California."

The governor's letter was followed by another sent by Terry Tamminen, California's environmental chief, who included data supporting Schwarzenegger's contentions. Much of the state's concern is tied to an ethanol-delivery system that originates far from California's borders.

Californians already pay about 20 cents a gallon more than the U.S. average, due primarily to the state's strict pollution standards. And while federal waiver advocates have not projected exact fuel pump savings, they agree that some savings are inevitable if the waiver is approved.

In leading the charge for the waiver, Schwarzenegger echoed previous efforts by the man whose job he took - former Gov. Gray Davis.

As governor, Davis repeatedly sought a waiver of the oxygenate mandate, going so far as to sue the federal EPA in August 2001.

At that time, Davis was also phasing out the oxygenate additive MTBE (methyl tertiary butyl ether). As of Jan. 1, California prohibited MTBE in gasoline because of water pollution concerns. The state's refineries have switched to ethanol as an alternative.

Oxygenates enhance combustion in motor vehicle engines, producing a cleaner burn and accompanying lower levels of emissions. But MTBE and ethanol must be handled differently, with a primary concern being ethanol's tendency to corrode pipelines. Oil companies add it at distribution points - where gas goes from pipelines to trucks or ships - while MTBE was typically mixed at refineries and moved through pipelines to distributors.

Now, many in California would prefer to see ethanol go the way of MTBE.

Their arguments could fill a book. They cite everything from refiners' ability to blend cheaper, cleaner-burning fuels to California's already strict standards for auto emissions.

And they cite multiple scenarios where ethanol could - and already has - been blamed for higher prices at the pump: the cost to transport ethanol hundreds or thousands of miles, tanker or rail transportation tie-ups that create spot ethanol shortages, weather conditions that produce a bad crop of corn (from which ethanol is derived), refiners that pour more gas into their blends because ethanol takes up less volume than MTBE and refiners that struggle to add proper ethanol amounts to the already tricky formula for summertime gasoline.

"Basically, we don't like the federal ingredients to meet the standard," said Jennifer Mack, spokeswoman at the AAA office in San Francisco.

Jeff Wilson, a spokesman for the Sacramento-based Western States Petroleum Association, called the ethanol-additive process "an unnecessary cost to consumers and a burden on refiners that doesn't make sense. The forced use of ethanol in California doesn't make sense.

"Give the (oil) industry a goal, and it will work to meet it. But don't mandate a government gasoline recipe."

The petroleum association has an unlikely ally in the Sierra Club, historically one of the harshest critics of the oil industry.

"In ethanol, there is a concern about evaporation, where you could actually have an increase in smog instead of a decrease," said Bill Magavern, a Sierra Club lobbyist in Sacramento. "We support the waiver. We can meet the standard without the oxygenate requirement."

The petroleum association, which represents major oil refiners such as ExxonMobil, BP and ConocoPhillips, and the Sierra Club have differing priorities for meeting clean-air standards without ethanol.

Wilson said the oil industry has an army of fuel-blending experts to turn loose on producing gasoline that is more environmentally friendly. Noting that "no two refineries are alike," Wilson said different clean-air solutions would likely be developed at different sites.

He contended that refiners' developing cleaner fuels is far better than relying on ethanol and its related transportation costs: "Ethanol adds complications. Ethanol is depending on rail (transportation) or a tanker on the Mississippi River or through the Panama Canal."

Magavern noted that the Sierra Club has long favored clean-air solutions at the manufacturing source, such as development of vehicles that do not require high-octane fuels and sophisticated engines that produce fewer emissions.

An informal sampling of Sacramento-area residents who were filling up at local pumps last week showed squeamishness about turning a possible clean-air solution over to oil companies. In a reversal of contemporary voter trends, most favored a continuation of federal regulation.

"At least with the federal government watching it, if something is not right, we can go to them and demand some answers," said Carlos Becknell, a 46-year-old Sacramentan filling up at the Unocal 76 service station at 15th and X streets.

Andrew James, a 43-year-old who moved from New York City to Sacramento almost a year ago, offered similar sentiments at a nearby pump: "When I came here from Manhattan, the cost of (homes) wasn't that bad, but the price of gas was the worst part. But I don't think I want the oil companies to have that much power in this. I think I want the (federal) government to keep an eye on it."

Others were more willing to let the oil industry have its crack at reducing air pollution.

"The people who make the gas have all the scientific knowledge to make it cleaner. Why not let them try to solve the problem?" said Carmichael resident Geraldine Leonard, filling up at a Chevron station on Greenback Lane in Citrus Heights. "I think it's in the best interest of the oil companies to make cleaner gas, and the (emissions) could be monitored by the state anyway."

That's a key point. No matter what gasoline blend oil companies might come up with, it would still have to meet California clean-fuel standards that are tougher than federal standards.

In the end, the federal EPA will make the call. And while some politicians and oil industry experts believe the agency will answer Schwarzenegger's request within a few weeks, Washington, D.C.-based EPA spokesman John Millett warned that California's case is "painstaking and technical."

Millett added: "There's a wide range of issues in California. It's certainly vehicle miles traveled, congestion, climate and geography as well. ... All I can say right now is that we're still reviewing the information."

Millett also indicated that attempts to compare California's request for a waiver with two states that have already received EPA exemptions on the oxygenate requirement - Arizona and New Hampshire - were far-fetched.

"Those are different cases with different issues," he said.

Analysts noted that New Hampshire's population density, traffic volume and climate are vastly different from California. And the New England state originally opted to go into the oxygenate program before initiating a prolonged effort to phase out MTBE.

Not surprisingly, one of the few voices calling for the preservation of the ethanol additive in California belongs to the ethanol lobby. Corn Belt states that produce ethanol stand to lose out on billions of dollars in the Golden State's massive fuel market.

In his letter to the EPA's Leavitt, however, Schwarzenegger saw a silver lining for ethanol interests, alluding to "California's fuel regulations that allow, but not require, oxygen in gasoline." The governor also mentioned the possibility of spurring ethanol production within California.

But for now, those plans are on hold as everyone waits to hear an answer from the EPA.

Carmakers Pull Plug on Electric Vehicles

By Chris Dixon, The New York Times

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FIVE to 10 years ago, when the future seemed to belong to electric cars - and California clean-air rules forced reluctant automakers to offer them - a small but enthusiastic group of optimists and environmentalists signed on as pioneers. While a few bought electrics outright, most signed leases that obliged them to return the vehicles after a few years.

Regulators and auto manufacturers have since pinned their hopes on newer technologies, like hybrid gasoline-electric vehicles and, further in the future, hydrogen cars. Electric autos have become orphans, abandoned in favor of more promising offspring.

Parental neglect has, in fact, turned into infanticide. General Motors and Ford are taking back electric vehicles when the leases expire - not to resell them, but in many cases to crush them. The companies have refused to sell them to leaseholders, saying there are not enough on the road to justify the maintenance costs, and they want to avoid liability for any problems that might arise. They see electric cars as an interesting but failed experiment that taught valuable lessons for the future.

But some drivers, upset at losing their cheap-running, zero-emission cars even as gasoline prices jump, are fighting back.

One Ford lessee, William Korthof, has hired a Los Angeles civil rights lawyer, Nora Quinn, to press his case. She says she may file a class-action lawsuit against G.M. and Ford on behalf of lessees.

"I am personally, morally offended by the idea that they would destroy these functional vehicles that have such a positive environmental impact," Ms. Quinn said.

Ray Levinson of San Francisco says he may also retain Ms. Quinn. Not only does he drive a Ford Ranger EV pickup, he has compiled a long, green résumé as an environmental programs manager for the United States Postal Service on the West Coast. In 2000, he organized an initiative that put 500 electric Ranger-based postal trucks on Southern California streets; he later oversaw a huge solar-power installation.

Although Mr. Levinson's lease ran out on Feb. 25, he has refused to return his 2000-model truck. He said that before the lease expired, he sought to buy the truck for the \$7,000 residual value indicated on his contract. "The next day," he said, "I got a call back that said, nope, no option, turn it in."

Ford's response is similar to that of G.M., which has quietly reclaimed most of its ground-breaking EV-1 electric cars, from some 800 lessees, since production ended in 2000. G.M. has crushed many of the cars, undeterred by rallies and mock funerals organized by the EV-1's devoted fans.

After \$1 billion to develop the bullet-shaped electric speedster, G.M. canceled the EV-1 after building about 1,000 cars. Dave Barthmuss, a G.M. environmental manager, said that although many lessees loved the EV-1, it didn't make enough money and cost too much to keep on the road.

"But we've learned a heck of a lot from the EV-1 in terms of technology transfer and what is necessary to sell advanced vehicles like hybrids and fuel cells," he said.

Mr. Barthmuss added that although many cars were crushed - he prefers "recycled" - vital parts were retained for the 100 or so that remain in private hands until all leases end in August. Other EV-1's will live on in museums or as research vehicles.

Ford, too, is quietly reclaiming its electric trucks. Most of the 1,500 Ranger EV's went to commercial fleets, but Ford also leased about 200 to individuals and sold a few. Only 180 or so remain in fleets; about a dozen are still in private hands.

Several Californians who leased Rangers, including Mr. Korthof of Pomona, who installs solar panels, and Dave Raboy, a rancher in Catheys Valley, near Yosemite, received letters from Ford offering to let them buy their vehicles when the leases expired. But they said that when they tried to exercise this option, they were turned down.

In December, Mr. Korthof retained Ms. Quinn. She cited several grounds for a possible lawsuit, asserting that contrary to Ford's assertions, several lessees were not told they couldn't buy their Rangers when the leases ended. She said Ranger and EV-1 drivers had no other options if they wished to drive electric vehicles. And she asserted that EV-1 lessees were being required to pay for wear and tear on crushed cars.

Mr. Barthmass said that wear and tear charges were not unusual for leased cars, and that not all EV-1's were being crushed.

While battery-powered vehicles made barely a ripple in the marketplace, they inspired near-religious zeal among many of those who bought or leased them. The impetus to sell electrics in California came in 1990 with a state mandate that 2 percent of automakers' sales had to be zero-emission vehicles, called ZEV's, by 1998. The mandate was to rise to 10 percent by 2003.

Automakers bitterly fought the requirement, arguing that it unreasonably manipulated the marketplace and forced consumers to buy vehicles for which they had shown relatively little appetite. In 2003, facing the prospect of prolonged litigation with G.M., regulators altered the ZEV mandate to include hybrids and hydrogen vehicles.

Mr. Korthof said his Ranger was a perfect match for his solar-panel business, since he can charge it using his own panels.

Mr. Raboy, whose lease expires in April, also charges his vehicle with panels on his ranch. "We're just trying to do our part," he said, "Not use gas, protect the environment and help with foreign oil in a small way."

Mr. Korthof said that when his lease ended in December, he refused to return the truck but continued to make the \$480 monthly lease payments. After what he described as several angry calls from the company, his lawyer, Ms. Quinn, contacted Ford. She said Ford would not agree to let her client keep the truck even if he signed a waiver agreeing to assume responsibility for its upkeep. But Ford has since left Mr. Korthof alone and is accepting his payments.

In contrast to G.M. and Ford, Toyota has allowed lessees to buy its remaining RAV4 EV's, and the company will continue to service them. "We offered these up for purchase, and when we did that we knew that we had a commitment from that point forward," Nancy Hubbell, a company spokeswoman, said.

Honda, which produced about 300 EV-Plus cars, allowed lessees to keep the cars so long as they do not require new batteries, unavailable parts or expensive service.

Ms. Quinn said she saw no reason Ford or G.M. could not sell the cars with titles that would indicate that the vehicles were no longer be supported by the manufacturers.

But this is not how Ford wants to do business, said Philip Chizek, the company's marketing manager for sustainable mobility, particularly with a technology that he said was never intended to be on the road for more than three to five years.

"Once the vehicle gets in the hands of the owner, they can make modifications that wouldn't be proper," he said. "They may not be up to Ford's standards in terms of preventative maintenance.

"Once you hand off the keys to someone with that type of unlimited liability, it puts Ford in a bad position. And that's not the type of customer relationship that we want."

Mr. Chizek said that when the trucks were leased, "we told them upfront that this was a limited lease and that the probability of them extending the lease is very slim because the technology would be outdated."

Less than two years after Mr. Levinson recommended that Ford receive the electric postal truck contract, the company pulled the vehicles out of service, saying batteries were not available, and substituted gasoline-powered Windstar vans. Had he known that his hoped-for 12-year fleet would be gone so soon, another bidder would probably have won the contract.

Today, he said, he just wants Ford to honor a more personal environmental commitment. "It costs me \$1.25 to charge the truck to get a 50-mile range," he said. "It's just criminal that in this time of

war for oil and these ridiculous prices for gasoline that I would be forced to give up something that's helping clean the air, eliminate our dependence on foreign oil and is just such a great vehicle to drive."

[Modesto Bee editorial, Monday, March 29, 2004:](#)

Valley has to scream for better air quality

When it comes to cleaning up the valley's air, we're not going about it in the best possible way. We don't really have enough science available to suggest the right measures, and most of the rules we have were largely crafted for other places, where conditions aren't the same. On top of that, we can't expect a lot of help from the outside.

This is the message from atmospheric scientist Thomas Cahill, who recently lectured in Fresno.

Los Angeles has made remarkable progress in reducing its ozone pollution. That's a good thing, of course, but the experience down south doesn't translate perfectly into the valley because conditions are so different in the two regions.

In fact, there is no other area of the country so well-designed by nature to create and trap ozone (in the summer) and particulate matter (in the winter), with all the associated health and economic costs.

"The Central Valley is going to have to take charge of its own destiny," Cahill told his audience. That's something the state as a whole has done in the battle for a safer environment. California fought for and won the right to make stricter rules than the federal government's with all manner of pollution and environmental dangers. Many other states have adopted California standards, going beyond what's called for by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

That hasn't happened yet with the valley, though. And it must.

One place to start, Cahill offered, would be a regular series of symposia hosted by valley universities. It's an excellent idea: Experts of all sorts could be brought here to do specific research, out of which could come solutions crafted for the valley.

We've also got to get gross-polluting vehicles off our roads. That will take state and federal intervention, which Cahill suggests we won't get unless we really start hollering at the tops of our voices.

Good advice. Let's all take a deep breath -- as deep as the air quality will permit -- and start screaming for help. That might get everyone's attention.

[Modesto Bee editorial, Sunday, March 28:](#)

Valley health care's sick state

The valley trails the rest of California in many measures of well-being: education levels, employment rates, annual income and so forth. A recent study elaborates on another area of serious concern, one clearly intertwined with the others -- health.

The San Joaquin Valley suffers from too few doctors and too high a rate of chronic ailments such as asthma and diabetes. Almost 17 percent of the valley's residents have no health insurance. More valley residents rely on Medi-Cal and government-paid programs and fewer get employer-paid coverage than in the Bay Area and other parts of the state.

The numbers and conclusions in the new report reaffirm those in a 1996 study by the same group of researchers from California State University, Fresno. The title of the latest report sums it up: "Health in the Heartland: The Crisis Continues."

Stanislaus County Public Health Officer Dr. John Walker says he normally associates the term "crisis" with an event. But he believes it's an apt label for the status of health care in the valley.

Stanislaus County's situation is among the best of the eight counties studied. The numbers are much grimmer for Merced County, for instance. But being the best of several in a bad situation is of little solace.

Much of the information in this study is not new. The Great Valley Center, based in Modesto, drew similar conclusions a year ago in a report that analyzed a larger geographical area. We can expect similar results, though more details, in a Stanislaus County report due in June.

Because the messages are so clear, these studies should get serious weight in determining how and where we spend public dollars and in setting priorities for community projects.

With nearly one-quarter of the valley's population covered by Medi-Cal and other government-sponsored health programs, our legislators and the governor must realize that major state cuts in those programs will hurt more in the valley than in more affluent areas.

The shortage of physicians affects everyone. Newcomers may struggle to find a primary care doctor who accepts their insurance or who is accepting new patients at all. It can take months to see a specialist, even for those fully insured.

People who don't have a regular doctor too often show up in emergency rooms, where they don't belong but have to be seen. The practice contributes to long waits for everyone.

[The valley's serious air pollution is a major factor in its high incidence of asthma, an illness that strikes across economic and ethnic lines. Reducing air pollution must remain at the top of the priority list.](#)

The valley's health care handicaps can hinder its ability to recruit new business. As a twist on the same theme, economic development pros need to be giving highest priority to bringing in employers whose jobs include health insurance benefits. Landing another retailer that hires almost exclusively part-time workers may generate sales-tax revenue for a city, but it doesn't contribute as much to the economy if those workers drain public resources by using Medi-Cal or have no insurance at all.

As the University of California considers building another medical school, we need to pull together for a valley location. Fresno got out of the starting gate first, but Modesto Mayor Jim Ridenour would like to make a push for the school as well. Either way, the valley stands to benefit and can clearly show the need for more trained physicians.

We need to appreciate and support existing programs, such as the family residency training program operated by Stanislaus Health Services Agency and Doctors Medical Center. Many of Modesto's family practice doctors are graduates of this program. Without it, our shortage of doctors would be far more acute.

Likewise, we need to recognize the value of health education. Teaching people how to eat well is far less expensive than treating the diabetes they may end up with if they don't.

Finally, as individuals we need to take responsibility for how much our lifestyle choices affect our health.

Studies aside, there are some positive developments.

Stanislaus County's rate of teens giving birth has dropped considerably. The county, which had one of the highest rates of hepatitis a little more than a decade ago, is now below the state average. In the category of communicable disease, Stanislaus looks pretty good.

The Kaiser hospital and expanded clinics, scheduled to open by 2007, will bring more physicians to town and provide additional emergency room space.

Finally, as the Great Valley Center has stressed, the need for nurses, therapists and other medical workers creates a great opportunity for a region with so many low-paying jobs and chronic unemployment.

The "Health in the Heartland" report is available at www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/pubs/HHH <<http://www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/pubs/HHH>>. The Great Valley Center's 2003 report is available at www.greatvalley.org/publications <<http://www.greatvalley.org/publications>>.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, March 28, 2004:](#)

Going to extreme

The clock is really ticking now in our efforts to improve Valley air quality.

It's increasingly certain that, sometime this spring, the Valley will slide voluntarily into the nation's worst category for smog. Barring an appeal of a court ruling in Bakersfield last week, the Valley will be granted its request to move into the "extreme nonattainment" designation, in recognition of our failure to clean up ozone pollution.

The move has been applauded in some quarters because it will save Valley businesses millions of dollars in fees and sanctions that would have gone into effect in 2005, the deadline for the cleanup under the existing "severe nonattainment" designation. It has been greeted with grudging acceptance by others, who acknowledge that the Valley had no hope of meeting the 2005 deadline.

Still, it sticks in the craw. We simply aren't doing enough to clean up our own bad air. And we had better get serious about the job. The move into the extreme category only postpones the sanctions, until the new deadline in 2010. It does not let us off the hook.

There have been some moves in the right direction. State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, pushed through several important pieces of legislation last year, and more action is planned. But none of the bills went easily through the Legislature, and as often as not, the biggest hurdles were other Valley legislators. We have little hope of making the even bigger changes we need if we can't even speak with one voice in Sacramento.

Take the problem of vehicle pollution. It's the single largest source of the crud that poisons our air, some 60% of the total. and our local San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District can't do a thing about it. "Mobile sources" -- mostly vehicles -- are under the control of state and federal agencies. That puts a tremendous burden on our state legislators and the Valley's congressional delegation. Are they up to the task?

We could make huge strides just by getting so-called "gross polluters" off the roads and highways. The technology exists for identifying such vehicles; it's hung up in Sacramento bureaucracy. Where's the push for getting these toxic clunkers off the roads and out of our lungs?

We need more and better science to explain just how pollution is formed and what it does. Where is the pressure on the state's research universities to do more?

Awareness of our air-quality problems has grown, and that's good. But they are still costing us billions of dollars and years of our lives. The problem has become -- in a word -- extreme.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

What's in a word? Plenty, when the word is "extreme," and it signifies our failure to clean up the San Joaquin Valley's dirty air.

[Guest Commentary, Visalia Times-Delta, March 29, 2004](#)

Blame environmentalists for gas prices

By Devin Nunes

It is hard to believe unleaded regular gas is cheaper in Visalia at \$2.10 a gallon than anywhere else in the central and southern part of California.

Each year, you and I both pay skyrocketing gas prices as refineries shut down for maintenance and retooling to produce summer or winter gas blends.

Our inclination is to blame the oil companies and accuse them of gouging us for profits. But that's not necessarily why we pay exorbitantly high prices. Like electricity and the rolling blackouts of a few years ago, the problem is one of an ever-increasing number of consumers and a decreasing number of suppliers.

Between 1985 and 1995, 10 California oil refineries ceased production even as the number of cars on the road increased. At a time when we need greater fuel refining capacity, we actually have 20 percent less than 20 years ago.

Why? Environmental controls make it too costly for oil refiners to produce petroleum products here in the United States.

Oil refiners have spent more than \$6 billion to comply with federal, and even more stringent state, environmental requirements. Not to mention the burdensome permitting process that discourages more refineries from being built. Furthermore, short-sighted environmentalists believe that it is impossible to protect the environment and explore for new sources of oil -- thereby blocking every opportunity to ensure reliable domestic supply of crude oil.

The result is that all of California's refineries must operate at capacity just to meet the never-ending demand for fuel.

So, Californians pay more for gas than other drivers around the nation. Regular unleaded gas in Washington, D.C. is about 50 cents a gallon cheaper than it is in Visalia -- about \$1.60 near Capitol Hill compared to \$2.10 here.

Each year the government and private industry invests millions of dollars in research and development of new, efficient energy sources. In fact, if the Senate passes the Energy Bill, we will be able to invest billions of dollars in alternative energy sources. However, until we harness a new source, we will need to continue to make the most of the petroleum-based fuel that powers our economy.

Furthermore, until environmental extremists, who continue to block new refineries and exploration, and willing legislators in the state Capitol wake up to reality, they will continue to make all of our lives more expensive -- thereby hurting commerce and job creation across the state. They need to recognize and acknowledge that we have the technology to protect the environment while providing affordable fuel.

U.S. Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, represents the 21st Congressional District, which includes Tulare County.

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, March 28, 2004](#)

Homeowners beware. To say that the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is "considering" a proposal to regulate air pollution by imposing fees is a lie. They are already counting the money and spending it in ways that will never, ever improve the air quality in the valley.

The district has already determined what they wish to charge builders and developers and is already promising money to local and county governments as incentives for their support.

The district knows no shame. Does it matter that fees have already been tripled? Does it matter that prices for homes have skyrocketed and that affordable housing in the valley is gone? No, it does not.

Builders and homeowners beware. This cannot stand. People should call and write their legislators. Every person in the valley should attend the "workshops" at the SJVAPCD and loudly voice your opposition to this sham. It is simply an extorted tax.

These fees are here to stay through good times and bad and will never go away. I urge all builders and developers to contribute to a Valley Defense Fund to stop this from happening. I will contribute the first \$5,000.00. Shame on you!

JOSEPH L. DOTY, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, March 28, 2004](#)

Oil companies not the enemy

There was another letter in the paper recently complaining about gasoline prices and blaming the oil companies.

This is wrong. A few simple facts will show why.

The price of gasoline depends on the price of oil, the cost of refining/transportation and gasoline taxes. The oil companies are not in control of any of this. The price of oil is set by the Arab oil producers and a large part of the recent price rise has been a sharp decrease in the value of the dollar against other currencies.

Oil is traded in dollars and the Arabs wanted to maintain their purchasing power in real terms. The cost of refining has been made much more expensive in California by clean air regulations, and it will probably get more expensive yet with further regulation. Maybe you thought clean air would be free?

And taxes: most gas stations post the cost of the state and federal taxes on gasoline. I think it was 29 cents per gallon plus sales tax last time I looked.

And you can complain about oil company profits all you want, but if they don't make a profit why would they want to keep producing oil, making gasoline and selling it to you?

Would you do all that as a no-cost service to the public? If not, why do you expect anyone else to?

And by the way, their profits go to their shareholders, who may well be you and your neighbors through pension plans and mutual funds.

If businesses can't make a profit, nobody will have anything to buy now and no retirement later. Russia tried this under communism and remember how well that worked.

-- DEBORAH OLSON, Bakersfield