

**Valley smog status holds up
Challenge of downgrade effort is denied in court.**

By Mark Grossi
The Fresno Bee

(Updated Tuesday, March 23, 2004, 5:33 AM)

Activists lost a bid Monday to stop the San Joaquin Valley from dropping into the country's worst-offender category for smog -- a category that will save millions of dollars in penalties for businesses.

The Association of Irrigated Residents, a South Valley-based group, had contended business concerns were placed ahead of public health in the downgrade, which gives the Valley five more years to clean up ozone.

In Kern County Superior Court, activists Monday asked a judge to stop the move until the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District had analyzed health effects in an environmental review.

Judge Kenneth C. Twisselman II disagreed, saying the review does not need to take place until the district assembles a new plan for cleaning up smog or ozone.

Activists are considering an appeal. "I'm surprised because the law is pretty clear," said lawyer Brent Newell of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, representing the group.

"It fits the definition of a project, and it required a review."

Unless an appeal is filed, the decision lifts the last barrier from the district's unprecedented request for the so-called "extreme" noncompliance category, which is occupied only by the Los Angeles area.

"We're pleased," said Don Hunsaker, district plan development supervisor. "Now we can focus on the plan."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will close the public comment period on the request Wednesday. The EPA is expected to formally accept the move in late May or early June.

The district -- which stretches from Stockton to Bakersfield -- made the request in December to delay the cleanup deadline from 2005 to 2010 and avoid millions of dollars in business sanctions. Officials said the Valley cannot achieve the ozone standard by next year.

Ozone, the main ingredient in smog, is a corrosive gas that aggravates asthma and other breathing difficulties. Local air officials said the 25,000-square-mile Valley, considered the second-worst place for ozone in the country, creates smog with hot, still summer days. The pollution can remain trapped in the bowl-shaped Valley for days.

Vehicles are the biggest source of the pollution, and the next significant cleanup of fuels and engines won't take place until 2007, officials said. State and federal agencies control those sources.

If the Valley had missed the 2005 deadline, an estimated \$36 million would have been levied on the business community by 2007. Another sanction would have required large new and expanding businesses to pay more for pollution reduction.

The federal government would have withheld more than \$2 billion in road-building money from the Valley, except for projects that promote the environment or safety. And the government would have taken over cleanup plans.

The sanction money could have been poured into air pollution reduction projects, such as mass transit, Newell said. Those reductions should have been studied to see whether the air would be cleaned any faster, he said.

But Hunsaker said such a review would have been too speculative. "It is too early in the process to start the environmental review," he said. "And we have full intention of complying as we make the plan and rules."

Transportation: Advocates spread word about high-speed rail

By David Chircop

The Merced Sun-Star

Last Updated: March 23, 2004, 07:25:21 AM PST

Exuberance, confusion and controversy have all been used to describe reactions to a proposed 700-mile bullet train system that would zip through Central California linking the state's major cities.

But one of the most prevalent reactions to high-speed rail and its potential role in Merced County continues to be: "High-speed rail?"

"I haven't heard anything about it," said Anita Fockler of Merced as she left Mail Boxes West on Alexander Avenue Monday afternoon.

While Fockler was optimistic about the concept of a train that could shuttle passengers at speeds exceeding 200 mph, she simply wasn't up to speed on the bullet train issue.

In April, Fockler and others can learn directly from some of those leading the push to make high-speed rail a viable transportation alternative in the next 20 years at an informational dinner here.

"California is a very populated state and it's going to get even more populated," said Mehdi Morshed, executive director of the California High-Speed Rail Authority. "We face serious challenges and we need to start to plan for it now."

By the year 2020, California's population is expected to grow by about 11 million people. That population growth translates to a greater demand on the state's highways.

A bullet train, according to a study prepared by the Rail Authority and the Federal Railroad Administration, would help ease much of that demand on the state's infrastructure, shrinking travel time and cutting back on traffic congestion. Environmental benefits would also follow, according to the study.

Morshed compared building a new rail transportation system with the massive expansion programs of public universities and highways in the years following World War II.

"Our predecessors helped to make a better life for us and we have the same responsibility (to help make a better life future generations)," he said.

Morshed and Joseph Petrillo, the chairman of the Rail Authority, will speak April 8 at a \$50-a-plate dinner hosted by Merced County high-speed rail advocates. The high-speed rail duo will be joined by Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced and state Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Merced.

Ben Duran, president of Merced College, is a member of the non-profit group Merced County High Speed Rail Committee, which is hosting the dinner.

"High-speed rail will not only provide numerous economic opportunities for the Merced community, it will relieve congestion, improve air quality and provide a safe and efficient transportation alternative," he said in a prepared statement.

Dr. Lee Boese, Jr., a Merced dentist who heads the committee, said the organization would also consider a town hall meeting to get the word out.

Boese and the Rail Committee have launched a campaign pitching the former Castle Air Force Base as a good location for a high-speed rail maintenance facility.

Such a facility, they say, would bring 2,000 jobs to the area, giving the economic backwaters of Merced County a needed infusion of activity.

The dinner will be at 6 p.m. at the Merced County Fairgrounds Pavilion. For ticket and event information, call 723-3776.

America's Top Asthma Capitals Worst Cities for People With Asthma Announced

By Jennifer Warner, Reviewed by Brunilda Nazario, MD

March 16, 2004

WebMD Medical News

Controlling your asthma may be a lot harder in Knoxville, Tenn., than in San Francisco or Florida, according to a new ranking of the America's top "Asthma Capitals."

The first annual list from the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America reveals the worst cities for people with asthma. Researchers ranked the top 100 metropolitan areas in the U.S. based on 15 prevalence, risk, and medical factors related to asthma, including:

Prevalence of asthma

Asthma-related deaths

Outdoor air quality

Annual pollen measurements

Smoking laws

Number of asthma prescriptions filled per patient

Number of asthma specialists

Knoxville, Tenn., Little Rock, Ark., and St. Louis topped the list as the three worst cities for asthma sufferers. Conditions were found to be much more favorable for people with asthma in the San Francisco Bay area, Miami, and Daytona Beach, Fla., which ranked at the bottom of the list of asthma centers.

"The Asthma Capitals list gives us evidence of how prevalent asthma is across the country -- a disease that has increased twofold in the last two decades," says Derek Johnson, MD, of Temple University Children's Medical Center, in a news release. "Despite the rising incidence, we are seeing an alarming amount of uncontrolled asthma, which points to the need for better education."

2004 Ranking	Metropolitan Area	Total Score
1	Knoxville, Tenn.	100.00
2	Little Rock, Ark.	87.02
3	St. Louis	86.37
4	Madison, Wis.	83.32
5	Louisville, Ky.	82.32
6	Memphis, Tenn.	82.13
7	Toledo, Ohio	82.08
8	Kansas City, Mo.	81.96
9	Nashville, Tenn.	81.69
10	Hartford, Conn.	81.67
11	Buffalo-Niagara Falls, N.Y.	81.53
12	Johnson City, Tenn.	81.51
13	Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton, Pa.	81.51
14	Springfield, Mass.	80.99
15	Pittsburgh	80.97
16	Milwaukee-Waukesha, Wis.	80.68
17	Chattanooga, Tenn.	80.39
18	Detroit	80.23
19	Dayton-Springfield, Ohio	80.04
20	Indianapolis	79.71
21	Columbus, Ohio	79.70
22	Fresno, Calif.	79.60

23	Wichita, Kan.	79.42
24	Harrisburg-Lebanon-Carlisle, Pa.	78.96
25	Lexington, Ky.	78.95
26	Albany-Schenectady-Troy, N.Y.	78.95
27	Philadelphia	78.45
28	Greensboro-Winston Salem-High Point, N.C.	78.26
29	Oklahoma City	78.12
30	Syracuse, N.Y.	78.03

Surprisingly, several big cities were in the bottom 50 including: Atlanta at 47, Washington at 50, Chicago at 56, and Los Angeles at 85. The metro area with a total score of 100 points did not necessarily have the "most severe" score for every factor, but rather, it achieved the highest composite score.

Recognizing Asthma Triggers

Researchers say more than 20 million Americans suffer from asthma. About half of those suffer from the most common form, allergic asthma, but many may not know it.

In people with allergic asthma, the coughing and wheezing of an asthma attack is triggered by exposure to allergens, such as dust, pet dander, or mold spores rather than irritants, weather changes, viral or sinus infections, or exercise.

"We need to help people with asthma know more about their disease, including recognizing whether or not they have allergic asthma, knowing their triggers and being more aggressive about seeking help from a physician specially trained to treat their disease," says Stanley Goldstein, MD, director of Allergy and Asthma Care of Long Island, in a news release.

Researchers say that a better understanding of the role of IgE antibodies in allergic asthma now makes it easier for people with the condition to get effective treatment. IgE antibodies are produced by the body in response to exposure to allergens and may cause the release of histamines and other chemicals that can lead to inflammation of the airways and an asthma attack.

SOURCE: News release, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.
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Stirring up dust and a health risk

LA Times Headlines - March 22, 2004

By Jane E. Allen, Times Staff Writer

Simply walking around the house and then plopping into a chair kicks up more lung-irritating dust than other everyday activities — and releases half as many air-polluting particles as smoking a cigarette.

Such particles can aggravate asthma and allergies, so people prone to respiratory problems are advised to be careful while dusting and vacuuming. But researchers have found that ordinary household movement can rival cleaning in generating indoor air pollution.

For instance, dancing on a rug can release the same volume of particles as dusting, while walking on a rug can churn up almost as much as vacuuming.

The measurements come from a newly released study in which Andrea R. Ferro, now an assistant engineering professor at Clarkson University in Potsdam, N.Y., set out to quantify the amount of air pollution created by housecleaning and other activity that stirs up dust that has settled on floors, furniture and other surfaces.

Although scientists have measured particles from direct sources like smoking and cooking, there had been scant attention paid to re-floated dust.

As a doctoral student at Stanford University, she and her colleagues placed particle detectors in the house of an allergy-suffering colleague who had wooden floors and thin area rugs (rather than dust-collecting carpeting) and no cloth-upholstered furnishings except beds and pillows. Over five days, Ferro and a colleague went about daily chores (folding blankets and laundry, cleaning and making beds) and engaged in a little recreation (kicking up their heels on the rug).

Most of the particles detected were bigger than 5 microns, which are considered a lesser health threat than smaller particles. But the researchers detected a substantial amount less than 5 microns, fine enough to lodge deep in the lungs, where they can decrease lung function and exacerbate asthma. The study appears in the March 15 issue of *Environmental Science & Technology*.

More Commuters Let Someone Else Do the Driving

Those who try public transit and carpooling discover personal as well as financial benefits.

LA Times Headlines

By Caitlin Liu, Times Staff Writer - March 23, 2004

To appreciate the many benefits of Sherry Kelly's commute by public transit, consider her warm and fuzzy family.

The Hawthorne grandmother of four, who works as an office assistant in Glendale, spends every morning and evening rush hour nestled in her bus or train seat, colored yarn trailing from her fingers as her bamboo knitting needles poke and purl.

"I think I've made 10 sweaters in the last two years," Kelly said, beaming as she recalled how she kept her daughter and grandchildren bundled up this winter.

Since Kelly began taking public transit to Glendale two years ago, she also has shaved hours off her commute. She used to spend two to 2½ hours each way slogging solo through the congestion of the 105, 110 and 5 freeways. Now, even with three connections, her commute takes 1½ hours. She lists other savings, in the thousands of dollars: less gas used, reduced wear on her car, lower auto insurance rates.

"I think more people should try it," Kelly said. "It's more relaxing ... and it's much cheaper."

With gasoline prices hovering near record highs across the Southland, transportation officials are touting the experiences of commuters like Kelly.

"There's never been a better time to share the ride," said David Sutton, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's executive manager of commuter services.

Those who can't forgo their cars every day are urged to try public transit when feasible.

"Relieve yourself [of] the stress of driving," said Los Angeles City Councilman and MTA board member Antonio Villaraigosa. "When you look at the high cost ... what a great value" the alternatives can be, he added.

Driving solo can be expensive these days. A typical commuter, living 15 miles from work and driving a car that gets 21 miles a gallon, spends \$19.43 a day, \$408 a month or \$4,896 a year on gas, car maintenance, repairs, depreciation and insurance, according to the MTA's 2004 estimates. The figures assume that the driver pays \$2.20 a gallon for gas and \$65 a month for parking.

An MTA day pass, allowing unlimited rides on Metro buses and rail lines, costs \$3. A monthly pass is \$52, or \$624 a year.

Commuters who carpool or vanpool typically pay \$3.38 a day, or about \$71 a month and \$852 a year, according to the MTA.

Sam Chakravarti, an engineer who works in Pasadena and lives in Corona, said he was feeling the pain of driving solo. He carpooled for years, but recently his schedule changed. Now his daily 120-mile round trip takes at least four hours — six when it rains.

So he called (800) COMMUTE, a hotline for people seeking transit or ride-sharing information, so he could be matched to carpoolers with a similar route and schedule. He hopes to squeeze into a vehicle with as many others as he can.

"The more people you have, the less cost you have," he said. "And if you get sleepy, you can have another driver drive for you. Driving alone is not fun."

Federal law gives tax breaks to companies that offer employees financial incentives to leave their cars at home. Kelly's company, for example, pays for her transit passes.

But if public transit or carpooling is not feasible, there are other ways to trim commuting costs, according to the Automobile Club of Southern California:

Slow down and drive gently so your car uses less gas. Ask your employer if you can work from home. Ride a bike. Keep your vehicle lubed and tires properly inflated to maximize fuel efficiency. Combine errands. Shop online.

If you have two cars, use the more fuel-efficient one for commuting, the Auto Club advises.

"There's carpooling, there's public transit, there's a lot people can do," said Marie Montgomery, a spokeswoman for the Auto Club. "You just got to think a little bit — about where you're going and when you're going."

For public transit schedules and ride-sharing information, call (800) COMMUTE. An online trip planner is available at <http://www.metro.net>. To sign up for a carpool or vanpool, try <http://www.ridematch.info>.