

Hybrid road rage

S.F. Chronicle editorial, January 5, 2005

A REASONABLE experiment -- promote hybrid cars sales by letting the high-mileage vehicles use commuter lanes -- was made law by Sacramento last year.

But hybrid drivers are stuck in a legal traffic jam. Lawmakers thought the change would begin this month, yet federal rules on highway money will oblige a time-consuming wait. Then there's the hovering presence of the Detroit car lobby, unhappy that the mostly foreign hybrids are getting a special privilege.

The result is that California can't use a law it passed. It may take months before solo drivers in hybrids whiz along in carpool lanes.

The law benefits the low-emission cars powered by both gas and electric engines. There are about 20,000 hybrids on state roads, with a third in the Bay Area.

To boost sales, state Assemblywoman Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, wrote a bill giving hybrids that get mileage of 45 miles per gallon or better access to the commuter lanes without a requirement for two or more occupants.

Ford fought the plan, saying it wanted the mileage number lowered to include its less-thrifty hybrid models. But this would defeat the intent of the law -- encouraging fuel efficiency -- and was rightly rejected.

These objections may come up again as Washington considers the California law. The commute-lane idea is stalled because a giant transportation bill, containing changes to handle the California hybrid law, failed to pass as expected. Congress will reconsider the package, a process that will take months.

There's an outside chance that a single-subject bill to solve the problem could pass. Or Ford and its allies may weaken the high-mileage rule.

In the meantime, California hybrid drivers won't get the benefit they expected. Congress should move quickly to end this delay before the road rage builds.

Air board begins two-year odyssey

Mission to clear Valley air is an uphill battle.

By Mark Grossi , The Fresno Bee

January 5, 2005

The San Joaquin Valley started Tuesday on a two-year journey to come up with a plan for cleaning up summertime smog.

And that is considered a fast track.

Planning and cleaning up for a new federal smog or ozone standard will not be simple, local and state officials say. They outlined the difficulties Tuesday in Fresno at a community meeting.

Authorities will need to control air pollution from cars, factories and new subdivisions on a grand scale - anticipating atmospheric changes for a 25,000-square-mile bowl with 3.5 million people.

They also must work with surrounding air districts, because they say the Bay Area and Sacramento sometime contribute to the problem. And the Valley is one of the fastest-growing places in California. "Population growth will have an effect on the air in spite of the controls," said Don Hunsaker, plan development supervisor for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

About 50 people, including industry representatives, government officials and some environmentalists, listened to the presentation. Air authorities described the stringent, new ozone standard and the realities of the Valley's problems.

Many privately believe the 2013 deadline for achieving the new standard will prove too difficult, but officials said they will not know for sure until they make a cleanup plan.

"The new plan might justify asking for a new classification, which would extend the deadline," Hunsaker said.

The new standard is based on an average of smog readings during eight-hour periods. This daylong standard is considered more protective than the one-hour level, which reveals short, intense spikes during the day.

The Valley has violated the daylong standard more often than any other place in the country, including the Los Angeles area's South Coast Air Basin, the smog king for a half-century under the one-hour standard.

Officials believe the eight-county Valley, ranging from Stockton to Bakersfield, is making progress in achieving the one-hour standard, which must be attained by 2010. But violations of the eight-hour standard have continued at more than 100 each summer for years.

Ozone is a corrosive gas that forms in warm weather, combining emissions from cars, power plants and other sources. Though air emissions already have been reduced over the past decade, many more tons of pollution will have to be removed from the air.

Tighter fuel and engine standards for cars and diesel-powered vehicles are expected to greatly help over the next five years. Other industries, such as agriculture, will experience more regulation, too.

But what about the smog-forming gases coming from the Bay Area? Estimates show more than 10% of the Valley's smog problem comes from the north on the worst summer days.

"Could we make the Bay Area pass more controls on refineries?" asked Sierra Club member Kevin Hall.

That's not exactly the intention of regional planning, said Kurt Karperos of the state Air Resources Board, which is responsible for air statewide. The state wants to fit cleanup plans from all areas together for clean air throughout California.

Said Karperos: "We're all in this soup together."

World Bank official says China's development threatened by rising oil imports, pollution, water shortages

CHRISTOPHER BODEEN, Associated Press Writer
in the S.F. Chronicle, January 6, 2005

(SINGAPORE (AP)) -- China's growing reliance on imported oil, pollution and looming water shortages pose the major threats to its economic development, a senior World Bank official said Thursday.

"The sustainability issues in China are the key issues in the next three to five years and the ones that are most likely to jeopardize its economic success," said Yukon Huang, a senior adviser to the bank who formerly headed its office in Beijing.

China is now the world's second largest oil importer, and it suffers from poor efficiency in turning oil into economic output -- just 1/7 that of Japan, Huang said at a seminar organized by Singapore's Institute for Southeast Asian Studies.

If China "cannot improve in terms of its efficiency the cost will be unbearable," Huang said.

Economic growth -- now running at about 9 percent, will likely fall to a more moderate 6 to 7 percent in coming years, Huang said, adding future growth would come less from new investment and more from greater productivity.

While China has cut industrial air pollution, the improvements have been offset by rising private car ownership, Huang said. China is now home to seven of the 10 worst polluted cities in the world, he said, saying that was something the country was "going to have to deal with."

Huang called growing pressure on dwindling water supplies China's "Achilles heel," saying that wouldn't be solved by projects under way to pump water from the relatively wet south and west to the arid north.

The struggle for water will lead to "a fight between rural interests, urban interests and industrial interests on who gets water in China," Huang said, adding 75 percent of China's rivers are too polluted to drink, fish in, or even use for irrigation.

Huang said such sustainability issues posed a much greater threat to China's development than political or economic risks such as the mountain of bad loans held by the nation's state-owned banks or the potential of conflict with Taiwan.

Yet he added that China had long proved itself able to overcome overwhelming odds in the past, standing alone among nations served by the bank in routinely exceeding development predictions.

"I don't know how or why," Huang said, "but I think that's the success for you for China."

Solo drivers of hybrids to gain from bill

By Lisa Mascaro, Staff Writer

Los Angeles Daily News, January 05, 2005

Sen. Dianne Feinstein announced Wednesday she will introduce legislation allowing solo motorists to drive hybrid cars in California's freeway car-pool lanes.

The state Legislature passed a bill last year to allow drivers of hybrids that get 45 mpg or better to travel solo in the high-occupancy vehicle lanes. Before the law can take effect, it requires congressional approval because federal money is used to build car-pool lanes.

"Hybrid vehicles are the wave of the future, and we should be doing everything we can to encourage their use," Feinstein, D-Calif., said in a statement.

"Changing the law to allow these hybrid vehicles to use diamond lanes certainly makes sense. I hope that the Senate will act on this legislation quickly."

The first day senators can propose legislation is Jan. 24.

Feinstein's proposal would allow California and other states to set their own regulations for allowing hybrid vehicles into the car-pool lanes, which are typically reserved for cars with two or more occupants.

Under California's newly passed law, hybrids achieving a 45 mpg fuel efficiency would qualify -- at this point, only the Toyota Prius and Honda's Civic and Insight.

Automakers have opposed setting minimum fuel efficiency, saying that new hybrids coming onto the market that don't get 45 mpg, such as the Ford Escape sport utility vehicle and the Lexus RX400H, should also enjoy the perk.

Project in southwest gets public hearing

Proposed development near concrete, asphalt plants, sewage facility

The Bakersfield Californian, January 6, 2005

The public will get a chance to sound off tonight on plans to build homes, shops and industrial businesses on 300 acres of Bakersfield land surrounded by a concrete plant, sewer treatment facility and an asphalt business.

The 300 acres are on farm land south of Panama Lane and west of Gosford Road.

An environmental report on the Don Judkins project goes before the Bakersfield Planning Commission tonight for a public comment session.

High on the list of potential problems the project faces -- beside concerns about air pollution impacts, protected species and traffic congestion -- is the project's close relationship to some nearby industrial businesses.

A Vulcan Asphalt plant sits on the project's northwest boarder. A Golden Empire Concrete facility sits across McCutchen Road to the south.

And the city of Bakersfield's Wastewater Treatment Plant No. 3 is nearby to the southeast.

City planners say the project buffers homes and apartments from the industrial businesses and the treatment plant with commercial projects.

There could also be questions, however, about the need for a large regional commercial center in the area.

Castle & Cooke's Gosford Village project, which includes a Kohl's department store and a disputed Wal-Mart Supercenter, sits directly north of the Judkins project at Gosford and Harris roads.

That project is under a cloud of uncertainty because the 5th District Court of Appeal ruled the city did a bad job of drafting the environmental report on Gosford Village.

City planner Marc Gauthier said planners are looking at the Judkins project environmental report closely, in part due to the court ruling.

Farmers face new air rules

Farmers must submit plans to reduce dust

By David Castellon, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, December 31, 2004

The new year may be only hours away, but Pixley farmer Dennis Martin already plans to start 2005 dealing with some unfinished business from 2004.

He expects to miss today's deadline for farmers to submit plans to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to reduce dust in their operations.

"I was going to look into it [Thursday], and I kept putting it off," said Martin, who grows wheat with his brother on their 320-acre farm.

He has actually been putting it off for months.

In May, the air district implemented Conservation Management Practices Rule 4550, requiring farmers to reduce airborne dust generated by cattle, vehicles, harvesting and other farm operations.

Farms that are used for grazing, those with less than 100 contiguous acres and dairies with fewer than 500 head of milk cows are exempt.

Farmers have a laundry list of dust-reducing programs - which include watering or oiling down dirt roads, posting speed limit signs on farms, reducing tilling and purchasing harvesting equipment that cuts down on dust - and they have to choose five.

Rick McVaigh, permit services manager for the air district, said about half of the particulate matter in the air over the Valley is dust generated by agriculture, and in Tulare County, farming operations send 7.7 tons into the air daily.

The goal of the CMP rule is to reduce agricultural dust across the Valley by 34 tons a day, or 22 percent, McVaigh said.

While farmers and dairy operators had until today to submit their plans to the air district, they had to begin implementing them by July 1.

Not that filling out the paperwork or following the plans have been that difficult, said Christopher Lange, who operates about 1,800 acres of farmland from Woodlake north into Fresno County.

He said the only complication was gathering information on the 24 sites he farms - including the amount of roads on each - before sitting down with a representative from the air district who helped him fill out his forms and suggested which dust-reduction strategies might best suit his operations.

"Everybody's been very helpful. We've had several meetings sponsored by the [Tulare County] Farm Bureau, the air district" and other groups to show farmers what they needed to do, Farm Bureau President Craig Knudson said.

He said he knew of no local farmers who hadn't submitted their plans. And McVaigh said that as of Wednesday, about 5,600 of the estimated 6,400 farmers who would be required to file CMP plans had submitted them, so it's possible that once all the last-minute filings are in only a small number of farmers will fail to file on time.

One of those is Martin, who said Thursday that he was too busy over the summer to attend any of the CMP seminars and he has been too busy to get the forms.

McVaigh said at least for the near future, no action will be taken against late filers.

As for enforcement, he said the district has a team of about 50 people who will visit farms to ensure CMP plans have been submitted and that farmers are following them. Exactly when the enforcement will begin, however, isn't clear, nor are the penalties for farms that don't file their plans or don't follow them.

Penalties for air pollution violations can be as high as \$10,000 a day, but CMP violations aren't likely to be that high, McVaigh said.

The reporter can be reached at dcastell@visalia.gannett.com

On the Net

Farmers can get forms and assistance to file their Conservation Management Practices dust-reduction plans online at www.valleyair.org and clicking on "New Requirements for Agricultural Operations."

Help also is available by calling the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District at (661) 326-6969.

Mall Expansion Requires Oaks' Removal, Study Says

By Gregory W. Griggs, Times Staff Writer,
The LA Times, January 5, 2005

If the three phases of the project are completed as planned, Ventura County's largest shopping venue would grow 45% to nearly 1.6 million square feet.

The mall owner is now only looking for city approval for the first phase, an expansion of almost 183,000 square feet.

Mayor Claudia Bill-de la Peña said The Oaks, which opened in 1978, needs to be updated but not to the extent that it damages the environment or the community's quality of life.

"I definitely think The Oaks needs to be renovated. It's a tired looking mall," she said. "It's just a question of how much and at what level that you do it."

Bill de-la Peña said she expected to take a week to read the 2-inch-thick report cover to cover, but is concerned about traffic congestion, unsightly parking structures and the loss of mature oak trees, which along with sycamores are protected by city ordinance.

Councilman Dennis Gillette said the center must modernize to remain competitive, especially considering the development of a \$300-million regional mall in neighboring Simi Valley due to open this fall.

"A level of improvement and expansion is absolutely essential to the economic well-being of the city," Gillette said. "Whether this is too much or not enough I'm not sure, that's why we're going through the process."

Bob Lewis, who helped lead a city advisory committee that reviewed the mall proposal, said Macerich made substantial improvements to the plan.

By removing some 82,000 square feet from the first and second phases, the parking structures will be smaller and one will be positioned closer to the mall, making it less visible from the Ventura Freeway, Lewis said. The developer has agreed to more than the required landscaping and intends to plant 300 oaks to the site.

With more than 1,360 trees already on the property, The Oaks is one of the most verdant malls in Southern California, said Judy Lazar, Lewis' co-chair. Lewis and Lazar are former Thousand Oaks mayors and planning commissioners.

"If you think of any other regional malls its size, few have as much landscaping. They're making the effort to make sure that remains," she said.

But the environmental report said the proposal would require the removal of 51 oaks and five sycamores and the relocation of 38 other protected trees. Considering trees planted, there would be a gain of 249 oaks and 75 sycamores once the construction is complete.

Traffic consultants estimate the expanded mall would generate 14,252 additional vehicle trips daily, though that number is based on the larger original plan.

To ease traffic congestion, the city expects the developer to help pay to expand the intersections of Lynn Road and Hillcrest Drive and Lynn and the Ventura Freeway, on the western edge of the mall.

Macerich has suggested several improvement to enhance the mall's current vehicle flow, widening exits and entrances, lengthening turn lanes and adjusting traffic signal timing, said Beth Baden, a senior engineer in the city of Thousand Oaks' traffic division.

The Oaks generated nearly \$17.8 million in sales tax revenue last year, of which the city expects to keep \$2.5 million, about 10% of the city's total sales tax receipts. The figure is up \$535,000 from the amount received seven years ago and the expansion is expected to increase the mall's sales tax generation by up to 50%.

Councilman Ed Masry said the expansion won't get his vote until he's sure all the environmental concerns are resolved.

"I don't see a problem with expanding The Oaks mall, as long as we're not destroying the Thousand Oaks ambience," he said. "I'm certainly not going to approve anything just based on increased sales taxes."

Macerich will hold meetings on three consecutive Wednesday evenings to discuss the project and the environmental review, beginning Jan. 19 at the Clarion Palm Garden hotel in Newbury Park.

The public has until Feb. 18 to comment on the draft environmental report.

City staff will respond to those comments in a final version of the report, which is scheduled to be reviewed by the Planning Commission on March 21 and later by the City Council, which will involve additional public hearings.

Recycling plant gets five-year extension

By Seth Nidever, Sentinel Reporter
The Hanford Sentinel, January 6, 2005

HANFORD - Kings County will keep its main recycling facility, thanks to a five-year permit extension issued this week.

The county planning commission voted unanimously Monday to keep Kings Waste Recycling Authority's recycling plant going for five more years.

Called the Materials Recovery Facility, the plant at the corner of Highway 43 and Hanford-Armona Road accepts trash from Hanford, Lemoore, Corcoran and the county.

Workers separate out the recyclables by hand. The recyclables go to facilities outside the county. The nonrecyclable trash is hauled out daily to Chemical Waste Incorporated's Kettleman Hills disposal site.

At Monday's meeting, Theresa Barbeiro, who lives south of the plant, complained of a stench wafting into her home.

Mike Adams, executive director of KWRA, defended the facility.

He said that three years of inspections by Kings County Environmental Health and several reviews from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District never turned up any violations.

And he said deodorizing misters, regular sweeping and daily trash removal keep the odor to a minimum.

Commission Chair Louise Draxler said she had driven past the plant several times without noticing an overpowering odor.

Adams admitted that the plant does have its bad days.

"Let's face it, in the July and August time frame, you can have an odor," Adams said.

And he said the smell can be powerful in the spring, when warmer temperatures cook grass clippings inside green bins.

But he invited the commissioners to come by and smell for themselves.

In her testimony, Barbeiro made it clear that she supports the recycling facility even as she raised her concerns about the smell.

After listening to Barbeiro and Adams, the commission decided there were no violations and reissued KWRA's conditional use permit.

Barbeiro said she would be meeting with the director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to discuss her options.

Meanwhile, KWRA will continue its effort to recycle a state-mandated 50 percent of Kings County trash.

Currently the county is recycling 48 percent, enough to earn a good faith exemption from the state.

Still, that percentage has crept downward the last couple of years, raising concerns that the state might suddenly decide to pull its exemption.

That could trigger fines of up to \$10,000 a day, Adams said.

He said that was unlikely to happen.

"I have faith in the people in my organization," Adams said.

In an interview with The Sentinel, Adams said he would love to see a recyclables bin added to the green bin already on the curb in Hanford.

Corcoran and Avenal are considering adding a third bin to their curbside pick-up programs.

At Monday's meeting, Adams told the commission that such a can would also go further to eliminate the smell by speeding up the processing time.

(The reporter may be reached at sndiever@pulitzer.net)

Air credits, vehicle fees are 'paper tiger' efforts

By KENNETH M. CANNON, Bakersfield
Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, January 6, 2005

Bakersfield City Councilman Mike Maggard's opinion against the \$2 increase in annual motor vehicle fees to improve air quality was right on.

If my calculations are correct, \$100 million has been spent on studying the cause of air pollution in recent years. Air quality is still terrible.

The Sierra Club has sued to get \$1,250 from each house that is being built on the east side of town. What this money will do to improve air quality in Bakersfield is questionable.

Air pollution credits are the biggest scam ever. One city I know of put asphalt on dirt roads that were seldom driven on and got pollution credits it could sell to other companies that wanted to continue polluting. Dumb idea. All companies should meet pollution credits, period.

On the other hand, our city government has not been a strong proponent of cleaning up our local air pollution. For instance, closing down local swimming pools and opening a centrally located pool has caused people to drive more miles to get to pools.

There is approval of the plan for Highway 58 to go north of town, upwind, on 7th Standard Road. The city, as far as I know, has not put electric automobiles in its fleet. Nor are there electric buses working in the downtown area. Only recently have there been natural gas-fueled buses in operation. Motor-driven leaf blowers and lawn mowers are still in operation. Developers are building houses before roads and highways are built.

Before we spend more money to enhance the air quality bureaucracy, which appears to be a paper tiger, we should look in our own backyard for immediate solutions to decreasing pollution.

Yes, the automobile is the chief polluter and anything that will reduce its time on the road would be welcomed -- maybe a \$2 per gallon tax statewide would really decrease driving. But from what we have seen, that ain't going to happen soon, if at all. So whatever else can be done to decrease other polluting devices should be accomplished as soon as possible.

Electric companies are now negotiating with farmers about the cost of standby time so farmers can convert to electricity from diesel fuel for their stationery engines. Cheap electricity for everyone would greatly reduce pollution overall.

Maggard concluded his article, "I sincerely hope you will join us in this most worthwhile effort." From what I have experienced attending those meetings, the air quality control people are not interested in what we "outsiders" have to say. They are the perfect example of group think. Our local politicians appear to talk about the bad air in terms of jobs and money, not in terms of health.

If people think another \$2 fee will help clean the air here, they are badly mistaken. We pay about \$60 every other year for smog checks. Has that helped? Where does that money go?

Kenneth M. Cannon is a retired Pacific Bell manager. Community Voices is an expanded commentary that may contain up to 500 words. The Californian reserves the right to reprint commentaries in all formats, including on its Web page.

Keep momentum

Letter to the Fresno Bee, January 6, 2005

As the representative for the 25th Assembly District, my goal is to improve the quality of life in the Valley. I look forward to continuing my work to strengthen our economy, bringing more jobs to central California, and addressing our air quality and water needs.

The upcoming legislative session is a promising one. While much has been accomplished to improve the state's economy and business climate since Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's election, the next two years are critical. We must not lose the momentum of the past year's accomplishments, but must continue to eliminate wasteful spending, make government more accountable and resist stifling economic growth with tax increases.

As chairman of the Rural Caucus, I am committed to seeing that economic renewal efforts benefit rural and central California. By helping small businesses grow and strengthening agriculture, we can provide jobs. I will continue to work closely with Sen. Chuck Poochigian and newly elected Assemblyman Mike Villines to accomplish these tasks.

There are many other issues of importance. We must strengthen partnerships between the Rural Caucus and local leaders in order to explore solutions to the Valley's air quality, agricultural and water needs. I look forward to these challenges.

Dave Cogdill Assemblymember

25th District