

They think they can: ACE expects train rider rates to rise

By John Upton, San Joaquin News Service

In the Lodi News and Tracy Press, Wednesday, August 30, 2006

Less than one seat in 10 is taken on the new middle-of-the-day train between Stockton, Tracy and San Jose, but Altamont Commuter Express employees are convinced it's a good start.

"Midday trains are usually a very slow burn," said ACE chief executive Stacey Mortensen, who said she hoped up to 250 people would eventually catch the service that began Monday. Mortensen said existing services were expected to fill as customers gained more options for leaving Tracy and returning home.

The new westbound train, which leaves Tracy for San Jose at 10 a.m., and the new eastbound train, which leaves Tracy for Stockton at 1:45 p.m., opens up the Bay Area to seniors and students Monday through Friday, Mortensen said. The midday trains are using three cars with up to 380 seats - but she said one might move to another service to relieve crowding there.

The new trains connect with the Bakersfield Amtrak line in Stockton, and all services connect with the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit system in Pleasanton. Aboard Tuesday's new morning service, ACE operations manager Hubert Hanrahan said commuter numbers were slightly stronger than they were Monday, when about 30 passengers hitched a ride on the inaugural run. He said he expected the number to grow by Friday as word spreads and advertising pays off.

Cisco Systems compliance engineer and frequent ACE traveler Keith Han, who was one of four people to catch the 10 a.m. service from Tracy on Tuesday, said the new timetable would make it easier to bring his wife and three kids to San Jose for day-trips.

He said three existing services, which leave Tracy between 4:52 a.m. and 6:58 a.m., are too early for his family.

"Now it's more convenient because we don't have to rush," he said.

A round-trip between Tracy and San Jose costs an adult \$15.

The new train is part of an overall effort to improve ACE service. More than 20 ACE trains on the existing morning and evening runs were delayed by between 15 and 45 minutes this month, and Mortensen said she hoped dedicated ACE rails would cut back on delays within three years.

"The economy out here is booming and (Union Pacific is) pushing a lot of freight containers through this area ... So the capacity that we have is just slowly ebbing away.

"My full-time effort is to try to get our own track. We're going to buy it where we can, lease it where we can, and build it where we can."

Assembly votes against additions to valley's air board

By Vic Pollard , Californian Sacramento Bureau

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2006

SACRAMENTO -- Legislation sought by environmental, health and farmworker advocates to shake up the San Joaquin Valley's air board was rejected by the Assembly Tuesday evening.

But it was given a chance for another vote before the Legislature's scheduled adjournment Thursday.

In a fierce lobbying battle that pitted Kern's two Democratic lawmakers against each other, the bill to give Bakersfield and other cities more clout and put medical professionals on the board fell 9 votes short of the 41 it needed for passage.

The 11-member San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board, dominated by representatives from county boards of supervisors, has long been criticized as too close to the agriculture and oil industries to crack down on two of the region's biggest sources of pollution.

The air board and its supporters insist the criticism is unfounded, saying it has made significant progress in reducing pollution in recent years.

The bill, SB 999 by Sen. Mike Machado, D-Stockton, would increase the air board's membership from 11 to 15. Three cities -- Bakersfield, Fresno and Stockton -- would get permanent seats. Cities now have two seats with rotating membership. A physician and an air pollution expert would also be added.

Assemblywoman Nicole Parra, D-Hanford, opposed the bill.

"The board is doing a great job," Parra said. "I feel that if folks want to be part of changing the way it performs, they should run for office."

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, helped Machado and other supporters lobby for the measure.

Florez said the current air board has "watered down" historic legislation he authored three years ago to require dairies and farms to comply with clean-air rules for the first time.

Kern's Republican Assembly members, Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield and Bill Maze of Visalia voted against the measure.

If passed by the Assembly, the measure must return to the Senate for a final vote, where it has passed once, before going to the governor.

Visalia groups endorse Measure R

Staff reports

Visalia Times-Delta, Wednesday, August 30, 2006

The board of directors of the Visalia Chamber of Commerce and the Visalia Economic Development Corporation have both unanimously voted to endorse Measure R, the initiative to improve local roads and highways.

Measure R, on the Nov. 7 ballot, is a half-cent sales tax measure that will provide funding to repair streets, highways and intersections throughout Tulare County and its cities. It will also repair potholes, improve safety and [air quality](#), complete bike paths and improve transit.

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Wednesday, August 30, 2006:](#)

The virtue of power

By Kathleen Parker, Washington Post Writers Group

THE ENVIRONMENTAL mandate to "think globally, act locally" gets tricky when it's your "local."

Nowhere is the conflict between virtue and practicality more vivid than in Tallahassee, Fla. -- capital of the nation's fourth-largest state -- where city officials are debating whether to build a new coal-fired power plant.

The question comes down to this:

Do officials seeking to diversify energy sources spend \$400 million to buy into a new electricity-generating facility even though coal-fired power plants account for 33 percent of carbon dioxide emissions, the leading cause of global warming?

Or do they seek alternative sources of energy that require more imagination and demand a cultural shift?

Although a local issue, Tallahassee's struggle is universal as communities everywhere grapple with rising energy demands and the need to wean Americans from fossil fuels. Other eco-friendly energy sources, though available, aren't always as reliable in the short run.

More to the point, they require thinking in new ways and demand some degree of personal adjustment. It's hard for most of us to wrap our minds around the notion that buying an energy-saving refrigerator -- or swapping one type of lightbulb for another -- in a place like Tallahassee is going to keep polar bears from drowning in the Arctic.

Tallahassee's dilemma is also richly ironic. The Democrats who run this town -- a tree-hugging Mecca whose city charter prohibits coal-fired plants -- are having a hard time sticking to the script as practicality clashes with ideology.

Not only is every commissioner a Democrat and professed environmentalist, but Mayor John Marks signed the U.S. Conference of Mayors agreement to reduce carbon emissions to pre-1990 levels. How does one reconcile that commitment with building a new coal-fired plant?

Marks says he wants to diversify to hedge against future high gas prices and insists that the new plant will be less polluting than older models. Practically speaking, his constituents are more interested in cutting their utility bills than in cutting CO2 emissions, he told me.

Further complicating the moral issue, the plant is to be built in someone else's backyard -- two counties away in a community where hybrid vehicles are rare and bumper stickers are more likely to read: "I'll give up my gun when they pry it from my cold dead fingers."

The proposed plant has many dissenters in the environmental community, but only one on the city commission -- Allan Katz, a local attorney and Democratic National Committee member. Morally, Katz says he can't justify building something in someone else's backyard that he doesn't want in his own.

Moreover, he insists, the plant is unnecessary. He prefers buying power from other, cleaner coal-fired plants, combined with other alternative sources (burning wood and garbage, for instance) as well as what's called "demand-side management" -- bureaucratese for helping utilities and citizens make more efficient use of energy.

Swapping those lightbulbs, for instance.

It sounds silly, but it's not. In the current issue of Fast Company magazine, Charles Fishman (author of "The Wal-Mart Effect") writes about a tiny, energy-saving miracle called the compact fluorescent light bulb (CFL) (www.fastcompany.com/magazine/108/open -- lightbulbs.html).

Improved, but not new, the CFL uses 75 percent to 80 percent less electricity than the classic incandescent bulb and lasts for about five years. Fishman predicts the CFL is about to change the world. Here's how: If all 110 million households in America replaced just one 60-watt bulb with a CFL, the energy saved would power a city of 1.5 million people.

Or save enough to shut down two power plants -- or skip building the next two.

What if Tallahassee handed out one free CFL to its approximately 80,000 households? I called Fishman to find out. He suggested giving 10 CFLs to each household at a cost of about \$1 million. (CFLs cost slightly less than \$3 each, but would sell for about \$1 in such bulk, he figures.)

Given that one 60-watt bulb replaced saves 65.7 kilowatt-hours per year -- and a typical U.S. household uses 10,700 kilowatt-hours a year -- then Tallahassee would save enough power to light 4,881 homes.

That's an energy savings of about 5 percent.

While 5 percent is a small savings in the grand scheme, it's a pretty good return on \$1 million. Plus, that leaves plenty of saved money -- oh, about \$399 million -- to direct toward other alternatives and innovations that don't involve producing more greenhouse gasses or polluting someone else's backyard.

Surely there's virtue -- and common sense -- in that.

[Merced Sun-Star editorial, Wednesday, August 30, 2006](#)

Our View: UC Merced's case is strong

University has set aside land to offset environmental impacts of campus expansion

UC Merced wants to do something unprecedented for the UC system: Plan the community that inevitably will grow up around the campus. It's a thoughtful and foresighted approach that could finesse many of the traditional conflicts that arise between "town and gown" in cities with UC campuses.

UC Merced must get a permit for its planned community from the Army Corps of Engineers, because some of the affected acreage contains vernal pools -- an important and threatened form of wetlands. There have been mixed signals from the corps as it wends its way toward a decision, and that's too bad.

The area proposed for the new community is adjacent to the southern edge of the campus proper and well east of the city of Merced. A contiguous community means reduced pollution from vehicles traveling to and from the campus, an important consideration given the valley's struggles with dirty air.

By law, the corps must consider three alternatives to compare with the university plan. One alternative is in Livingston, some 20 miles from the campus. It is being considered only because it would result in no wetlands loss; otherwise, it has no merit.

The other alternatives would consume a great deal more productive farmland than the UC's preferred site, and each would add considerable cost for land acquisition to the development of a community to serve the campus.

Protecting wetlands is an important goal, but the university has acquired and set aside in perpetuity an incredible 25,000 acres east and north of the campus to offset the 86 acres of vernal pools that will be eliminated by its plan. Previously, the UC has done much to avoid and minimize wetlands loss. Recall that the campus was built on a former golf course because of concerns about its original site.

The UC has done a great deal more to mitigate the unavoidable impacts of its development than similar institutions in other parts of the country. Further, the campus is a model for environmental efficiency, and its science and research emphasis will be contributing to a better environment for decades.

UC Merced's case for its contiguous community plan is strong. It is sensitive to impacts on natural resources, it makes sense from the transportation and air-pollution perspectives, and it will ease the historic dislocations older UC communities have suffered.

The university first submitted its application for this permit in 2002. It will take several months more for the corps to reach its decision. The valley waited 40 years for a UC campus, so a few more months for this part of the overall plan won't be so bad.

The UC's plan deserves the support of everyone in the valley, including our representatives in Congress. It deserves the support of the Army Corps of Engineers, as well.

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, August 30, 2006:](#)

Change Air Board

In this session's final hours, the Legislature is considering a bill that would change the membership of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Board. If approved by the Assembly and Senate and signed by the governor, it will make two major changes:

- Give the three largest cities in the district, including Bakersfield, each a permanent seat on the board, rather than sharing a single seat on a rotating basis, as they have been doing. A seat will be reserved for a representative of the smaller cities in the district.
- Add two seats for specialists: a physician and a scientist with expertise applicable to air pollution problems.

The public health officers in each of the eight counties in the district would be involved in the nomination and review of the gubernatorial appointees to the "specialist" seats prior to Senate confirmation. Residency in the district will be required.

These changes will enlarge the board from 11 to 15 members (the two additional city representatives and the two specialists.) We truly need all the help we can get. We are one of the most polluted regions in America, often beating out Los Angeles with the worst air quality.

The experts, in addition to providing more public representation, will help counter the power of developers and huge businesses. These entities often have interests that increase pollution and are reluctant to help decrease the bad air. Too often they are able to influence the elected county officials who sit on the board and whose campaigns may be beholden to them.

Laura Dennison, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wednesday, August 30, 2006:](#)

Saving enough money to fill that big gas tank

As I was reading the Aug. 27 Bee, I noticed the section on making homes more efficient. Included with the story was a picture of the homeowner's garage with a list of the improvements he made to make his home more energy efficient.

There was also a picture of a Toyota Prius and a statement that it has an electric engine combined with a gas engine to improve economy and reduce emissions. There was even bicycles hanging from the ceiling (very impressive).

Of course, I couldn't help noticing the big gas-guzzling SUV parked next to the fuel-efficient Prius. It's a good thing that the homeowner has implemented all the energy-efficient and money-saving improvements on his house, because he probably needs the savings to fill up that monster.

Bill Casarez, Fresno