

Sprawl pushes dairy families to consider leaving California

By Christine Almeida, Associated Press Writer

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CHINO, Calif. (AP) - Watching his 18-month-old grandson waddle past a herd of cows on the family's 80-acre dairy farm, Sybrand "Syp" Vander Dussen feels certain about one thing.

The boy, the youngest in a long line of dairymen, will one day follow in his footsteps.

The question is where.

For nearly 60 years, the Vander Dussens have milked cows. Suburban development edged them first from a farm near Los Angeles and is now squeezing them from land in once rural San Bernardino County.

In a state where the lines between rural and urban are disappearing, homes and cars are winning out over farms and cows.

The flight of dairies is nearly complete in Southern California, marking what could be a turning point in California's long-held dominance over the industry.

Soaring land prices and tough, new environmental regulations have many dairy families such as the Vander Dussens thinking about leaving the only state they've ever known - where their parents and grandparents sought the American dream.

Caught in the grip of urban sprawl, Vander Dussen is a shoot-from-the-hip realist. He knows his options are limited and pulling up roots may be the only way to survive.

"Dairies have gone from darlings to dogs within five years," he says. "Everyone attacks us, nobody wants us."

As a boy of 4, Vander Dussen and his family arrived in Southern California in 1947, fleeing World War II devastation in Europe.

Raised on a dairy farm in Holland, Syp's father turned to what was familiar - first leasing land for a dairy and later purchasing seven acres in southeast Los Angeles.

As suburbs spread in the mid- to late 1960s and land values spiked, the family packed up and headed 35 miles east to a place they thought they could expand their dairy operation without fear of sprawl.

A fertile valley nestled below the San Gabriel Mountains, the Chino Basin straddling San Bernardino and Riverside counties was home to orchards and other crops and had the nation's largest concentration of cows per acre in the late '70s and early '80s.

When his father retired in 1969, Vander Dussen took over the family's property, now home to more than 6,000 cows. Amid his sea of Holsteins, Vander Dussen hardly notices the smell.

Now 63, he chuckles at the memory of his father thinking of the area as "Timbuktu." All these years later, the steady march of progress has found them.

"It will all be gone in two years," Vander Dussen said, driving past acres of bulldozed dairy land. "It's done. It's too bad."

There were once over 450 dairies in the area. Today that number is 150 and falling. Dairy remnants - former buildings reduced to piles of broken concrete - litter the area like cold graves as they wait to give way to tract homes, which sprout like weeds in the area.

Now considered one of the most attractive areas in Southern California for residential and commercial developers, the city of Chino has a motto of "Where Everything Grows." It no longer applies to crops.

Of the dairies still standing in the area, between 70 and 80 percent have been sold or are in escrow, according to Nathan deBoom of the Milk Producers Council. Some dairymen are being offered up to \$550,000 an acre - a strip they may have purchased for \$3,000 some 40 or 50 years ago.

At those prices, it's hard to say no. Staying would mean being surrounded by homes, neighbors complaining about the smell and perhaps most of all, the feeling of being unwanted.

"We're seeing this transition of cows to cars, pasture to pavement," deBoom said. "It's kinda the story of Southern California."

Some longtime dairymen or their widows have decided to walk away. For those like the Vander Dussens who want to relocate, the future is uncertain.

The Central Valley is now home to most of the state's multibillion-dollar dairy industry. The eight-county stretch of fertile land in the middle of California has nearly 1.4 million cows at 1,500 dairies.

Twenty years ago, a move north would have been relatively easy. But dairymen point to a number of factors that in recent years made the Central Valley less attractive.

Groups like the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment have been active in holding dairies accountable for current conditions in the Central Valley, which has some of the most polluted air in the nation. Concerns center on cow emissions, ranging from manure to rumination, that are released into the atmosphere and react with other pollutants to form ground-level ozone.

The group cites statistics - one in six children in the Central Valley take an inhaler to school because of asthma - and have filed lawsuits seeking to compel new or expanding dairies to complete extensive and expensive environmental impact reports.

Dairies "were given a free pass to pollute, and they still have the attitude that the air is their toilet," said Brent Newell, staff attorney for the center.

The situation changed dramatically when a state law went into effect in 2004 requiring dairies to adhere to air pollution standards, just as commercial and industrial businesses do. They had previously been exempt.

To operate a dairy in California, a dairyman now needs a dozen different permits, according to Michael Marsh with the Western United Dairymen. In places like Texas and New Mexico, dairymen need one or two, he said.

"Folks would like to stay here in California," Marsh said. But "a significant number of them, after trying repeatedly to relocate farms in the Central Valley, have instead made the decision to go ahead and move their families out of state."

Marsh and others, including Vander Dussen, say dairies have been unfairly targeted.

"Dairies are not bad for the environment. Dairies can control the problems and the complaints," Vander Dussen said. "We cannot control the environmental onslaught."

Milking cows has been a way of life for the Vander Dussen family for longer than any one of them can remember.

At 14, Vander Dussen's son, Mark, was sent to breeding school to learn how to artificially inseminate cows.

"I would have done it at 13 but he wasn't tall enough yet," the elder Vander Dussen said.

Now 39, Mark Vander Dussen co-owns the family's farm. He's been preparing himself for the possibility of a move for some time.

"I'm not sad," the younger Vander Dussen said. "I think we'll be doing something somewhere. We're just not sure where."

To stay in California would cost the family \$21 million to purchase 3,000 acres in the Central Valley. They would need an additional \$15 million to construct the dairy. Because their farm is in a future flood zone, the family only expects to receive about \$19 million for their land.

But a few states away in Texas, the Vander Dussens could purchase land for \$1,700 an acre and build a dairy for half the cost. The total price would be around \$12 million.

The family will likely head east.

"The alternatives are too attractive," Vander Dussen said.

If they leave, they will join an estimated 60 dairy families that have left the state in the past two years from the Chino area. Industry experts predict the trend will continue.

To Tom Alger, a second-generation dairyman, Texas makes sense.

"The land is cheaper. The cost of doing business is a lot less," Alger said. "We think we can make it there."

That's what worries some in the \$5 billion California dairy industry. They fear those leaving now could be the first in a seismic shift of production out of state.

"If the regulatory burden continues to outpace the producers' ability to stay in business, they will just continue to leave," said Marsh of the Western United Dairymen. "It will mean a smaller industry. But it also means a loss of a significant number of jobs."

For now, the state Department of Food and Agriculture is not concerned. Milk production in California has steadily increased by 4 percent each year despite some farmers deciding to leave the state, according to department spokesman Steve Lyle.

"When you look at the numbers, you see the dairy industry as a whole - not just viable but burgeoning," Lyle said.

If the Vander Dussens decide on Texas, they will likely end up in the Panhandle, a stronghold of agricultural tradition.

Dallam County lies in the northwest corner of Texas - 60 miles long by 40 miles wide and home to about 6,000 residents. The number of large dairies is expected to more than double in the next few years as farmers flood the area from California, Wisconsin and elsewhere, according to Dallam County Judge David Field.

"We are just the ideal location," Field said. "There are very few people out here. It's wide open spaces."

The hope of many, including the Vander Dussens, is that it's just remote enough. But the move will be hard. Vander Dussen likes California. The weather is perfect for raising cows, he says.

But he's frustrated by the indifference. He sees local hardware shops closing and mom-and-pop gas stations forced out of business by chains that come with urban sprawl.

"Nobody cares," Vander Dussen said. "The dairy business is being scrutinized, and being permitted and lawsuits away. Nobody cares."

City kids find green germane

Program uses Crissy Field, new curriculum to make environmental science relevant to urban students

Glen Martin, environment writer,
S.F. Chronicle, Monday, February 27, 2006

It's something of a running joke among the kids at San Francisco's Galileo High School, says science teacher Lisa Franzen.

She asks her students: Who cares about the environment? They answer: old white hippies.

The subtext, of course, is that the school's students -- young and many colors other than white -- feel left out of the picture when it comes to environmental matters.

"Many never felt they were issues that addressed their needs, their priorities," Franzen said.

Or that's been the case until lately. A new program sponsored by the Goldman Environmental Prize is giving urban kids an opportunity to discover links between the city streets that circumscribe their lives and the natural world beyond.

The program, which provides high school teachers with a curriculum and teaching materials, seeks to educate kids about both environmental science and the history of environmental activism.

Franzen is using the curriculum, folding it into an educational initiative sponsored by the Crissy Field Center at the San Francisco Presidio and supported by Galileo High School and several other public agencies and institutions. The program provides facilities and extra teachers for Franzen's classes.

At the center on Wednesday, about two dozen students participated in a wide-ranging discourse on air pollution, environmental policy and the scientific process.

"One of the things we have to ask is whether data is reproducible," lectured Doug Kern, the head of the Urban Watershed Project, a San Francisco group that is restoring riparian habitat in the Presidio.

"In other words," Kern said, "can any of us go out and collect data and get the same results time after time?"

The students listened to Kern before going out into the Presidio to collect air-pollution monitoring devices they had set out the week before. Later in the day, they would analyze the data from the devices -- basically cardboard boxes that capture particulates on a sticky matrix -- to arrive at estimates of general air-pollution loads.

"There are three basic types of air pollution that are monitored," Kern said. "Particulates, oxides -- which you get from car exhaust -- and VOCs, things such as paint vapors. We're looking for particulates, which can consist of soot from around the freeways, or pollen grains from the trees."

It was technical and rigorous stuff, but none of the kids seemed distracted or bored. No one doodled or stared slack-jawed into space. They were focused on Kern; they were engaged.

Earlier, they had watched a video on Margie Richard, an African American woman from Norco, La., who had battled Shell Oil over air pollution from local petrochemical plants. Richard was a recipient of one of the Goldman Prize cash bequests that are given annually to "environmental heroes" from around the world.

Richard's story -- about a poor woman of color who stood up to a corporation polluting the air -- resonated with the kids.

"I live in Hunters Point," said Jonathan Tijerino, a senior. "You read in the papers about the environmental problems out there, and it's sort of similar to what Margie Richard went through. If it's just you, then you might want to leave and never come back. But when you have your mom there, your family there -- well, then you have to stay and fight. Everyone has a right to clean air."

Franzen said the hands-on components of her curriculum are especially important because they give kids who live in urban circumstances a chance to experience the natural world.

"I think that gives them a better sense of the real stakes than anything we could tell them," Franzen said. "Once we had some kids out at the Crissy Field lagoon listening to a talk by an ornithologist. Suddenly this great blue heron flew in, started hunting and BAM! It just pegged this gopher. You could see the kids' eyes light up -- it was like, 'Oh, yeah -- food chain.' "

The kids buttressed Franzen's observations with enthusiastic recollections of recent field trips.

"I enjoy everything we do, including the lab work," said Leonette Padol, a junior. "But I really like it when we're outside. We spent a day planting trees in Tennessee Hollow (in the Presidio), and that was one of my favorite times."

Senior Mary Grace Guarin said Franzen's class transcended typical rote learning because "we're actually out in the environment, seeing it with our own eyes. We went out on the bay last semester, and it was incredible. We saw spider crabs, mussels, sea lions. It made everything we've been studying real and important."

Charity Mayberry, a senior specialist in urban ecology with the Crissy Field Center, said the program demonstrates that kids will make a sincere effort to master any subject, including science, as long as they can grasp its relevance to their own lives.

"Science has left so many of these kids behind, and we really owe it to them to change that," Mayberry said. "One thing this program does is connect the kids to the environment we all live in. It shows them environmental studies are for everyone, not just the wealthy and the elite."

And not just for old white hippies.

Gov.'s Plan Is a Boon to Area Rail Infrastructure proposal aims to cut truck traffic and overall pollution by unclogging train routes. But it depends heavily on private sector funds.

By Caitlin Liu and Amanda Covarrubias, Los Angeles Times, Sunday, February 26, 2006

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's \$222-billion infrastructure improvement plan for California has the potential to transform the region's antiquated rail system, which has become increasingly congested with freight and passenger traffic.

Southern California's railways remain a relic of the pre-World War II era even as the region has become one of the world's top gateways for goods in the 21st century. With rail space at a premium, freight carriers compete for time with burgeoning commuter rail lines — an arrangement that has left the Southland's Metrolink system struggling to keep its trains on time.

Officials estimate that rail traffic will increase more than 40% in the next decade, creating more-severe congestion.

Although the governor's freeway improvement proposals have garnered the most attention, transportation experts say his ideas about rail expansion might have a much greater effect on Southern California in terms of transit and the economy.

The governor's proposal calls for spending billions of dollars on rail line improvements, such as adding tracks, creating grade separations — overpasses or underpasses to keep train and auto traffic separate — at dozens of rail crossings, and expanding cargo-loading facilities in an effort to speed up trains.

The goal, administration officials say, is to encourage more use of freight trains to help clear freeways of cargo-carrying trucks — and, it is hoped, reduce diesel pollution.

"The freeways are already too congested, and so part of the governor's strategic growth plan is for capital investments," said Sunne Wright McPeak, Schwarzenegger's secretary for business, transportation and housing.

The governor's plan is generating excitement in rail and commerce circles, with officials saying it has the potential to make significant improvements in the movement of goods.

But some Democratic legislators believe some of the financial details are too optimistic. Some leaders of the Legislature last week said they wanted to scale down the infrastructure plan.

Furthermore, communities along rail lines worry about the noise and pollution that would come with more trains.

In the city of Commerce, officials say residents suffer health problems from truck and train shipping centers in and around the community. Three years ago, an out-of-control freight train derailed in a residential area, flattening several homes.

"We suffer the impacts of overflow.... We've seen increased incidents of cancer, asthma, bronchitis and learning disabilities," said Councilwoman Nancy Ramos, who calls herself a "second-generation asthmatic" whose children and grandchildren are now "third- and fourth-generation asthmatics."

"We are against rail expansion," she said.

Hundreds of steel boxes packed with tennis shoes from Malaysia, dolls from Indonesia and electronics from China cover nearly every square inch of the 243-acre Hobart train yard just south of downtown Los Angeles.

Hard-hatted workers in two-story mechanical lifts operate metal arms with claw-like steel fingers that grab the containers and place them on freight cars bound for cities across the nation.

But with more and more cargo from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach arriving around the clock, the mechanical lifts and 8,000-foot trains sometimes have a hard time keeping up.

Today the Los Angeles-Long Beach seaport complex is the fifth-busiest in the world, after

booming ports in Asia, including Hong Kong and Singapore. Container traffic, which more than doubled in the last decade, is expected to nearly triple in the next 15 years.

To keep up, about 114 freight trains now roll across the region on mainline railroad tracks, shared with 70 commuter trains, every day. By 2010, train traffic is expected to grow by 44%, to about 165 cargo and 100 passenger trains a day, according to the Southern California Assn. of Governments. If nothing is done by then, tracks could get so backed up that each train would take an extra three hours and 20 minutes to crawl through the region.

By 2025, rail traffic is expected to grow 47% more, to nearly 390 trains a day.

The growth in train traffic alarms experts because of potential ripple effects: Delays along rail lines increase the cost of hauling freight, which could cause companies to switch to trucks — further clogging freeways and polluting the air with toxic exhaust fumes.

The Southland also depends on a healthy freight transport system for its employment base, economists say. An estimated 550,000 jobs in the region are directly or indirectly associated with trade and transportation activities stemming from the twin ports, which saw trade volumes more than double over the last decade, according to the Los Angeles Economic Development Corp. Planners and economists say trade volume could triple in the next 20 years. Schwarzenegger's plan, now being considered by the Legislature, is the biggest of several efforts in recent years to improve Southern California's rail system.

Until now, the biggest project was the \$2.5-billion Alameda Corridor, a freight train superhighway opened in 2002 that runs 20 miles from the ports to near downtown Los Angeles.

The region's two major railroads — Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Union Pacific — are in the midst of their own infrastructure expansions.

Burlington Northern is planning to build a new rail yard in Long Beach to handle the increasing volume of freight from overseas.

The company also is building a third set of tracks through the Cajon Pass in San Bernardino County, a key corridor between the San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains. Yet planners say the congested pass already could use quadruple tracks, and they predict it will need a fifth set of tracks by 2010.

Union Pacific is double-tracking portions of its mainline route in the region, including congested areas of Pomona, in east Los Angeles County, and Fontana, in San Bernardino County.

Despite these projects, railroad representatives and transportation experts say the system is still in dire need of help.

In Colton in San Bernardino County, Union Pacific and Burlington Northern tracks intersect at a 90-degree angle — which means trains sometimes have to wait for each other to cross.

The Colton crossing "is a major element in slowing down all the freight in Southern California," said John Husing, a consultant to SCAG. "The whole rail system in Southern California is reaching capacity. The tracks are overwhelmed."

The rising freight traffic is also causing problems for Metrolink, which runs about 40 trains a day between downtown Los Angeles and outlying suburbs.

"We'd like to go up to 56 trains by 2010," said David Solow, chief executive of the commuter rail service that serves L.A., Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura counties. "It's a struggle. I can't add any more trains without more track investment."

Metrolink leases nearly half of its 400-mile track system from Union Pacific and Burlington Northern. And their track-sharing arrangement has become increasingly tense.

On a recent morning, Metrolink canceled train No. 401 on its Riverside Line after freight cars blocked its path, delaying about 180 passengers for an hour.

The next day, the same commuter train was delayed 28 minutes, again because of conflicts with freight haulers.

Schwarzenegger's plan would eliminate some street-level crossings and would extend existing tracks around Union Station, allowing trains to move in and out of the depot more freely and without having to reverse directions. The governor also proposes triple-tracking an eight-mile stretch east of downtown to reduce congestion caused by passenger trains sharing tracks with freight trains serving the two ports.

The governor also wants the state to borrow \$3 billion over the next decade to upgrade the region's freight transport system. The state would provide 20% in seed money, while the private sector and other public sources would contribute the remainder.

But critics question whether the private sector will be able to come up with its share of the 80% to cover some of the projects. They also chafe at Schwarzenegger's plan to have state officials, rather than local agencies, determine which projects receive funding.

"We tried that approach in the past with the [Gov. Gray] Davis administration, and I don't think it worked very well," said Assemblywoman Jenny Oropeza (D-Long Beach), chairwoman of the body's transportation committee.

Oropeza said that instead of earmarking specific projects, the governor should make available a pool of money and allow local transportation officials to determine how best to use it.

On this much, many experts agree: Increasing the use of rail is one of the region's best and quickest hopes for reducing freeway congestion and improving air quality.

The average freight train, with about 280 cars, takes an equivalent number of trucks off freeways and environmentally is three to four times cleaner, experts say.

Also, expanding the freeway network, such as building toll lanes for trucks, could take a decade or more to complete. In contrast, major rail improvement projects could be done in a few years — a much quicker fix for the region's transportation woes and clean air needs.

"The governor's plan is a good step forward," said Hasan Ikhata, director of transportation policy and planning for the Southern California Assn. of Governments. "Something has to be done, and done fast, to keep this region competitive. Now the private sector has to step to the table."

Patterson might expand even faster

Development firm plans community of 3,100 homes northeast of the city

By Garth Stapley, staff writer

Modesto Bee, Monday, February 27, 2006

PATTERSON — The fastest-growing city in Stanislaus County shows no sign of slowing down.

A development partnership is jazzed about newly unveiled plans to transform 670 acres of farmland northeast of Patterson into 3,100 homes, a few stores, some light industry, three schools and a regional soccer complex.

City officials — who must decide whether to annex the huge swath — are wary about the prospect of more traffic and air pollution, but intrigued by promises for a sharp increase in affordable housing.

School officials are excited by the thought of finally offering classes on the city's east side. About 500 students of all ages have to cross busy Highway 33 to attend school.

Farmers eager to cash in and move on were instructed by developers not to talk about it, one said. But a 90-year-old woman who hasn't signed anything is despondent, saying she never dreamed the city would overrun her farm.

At issue is the Villages of Patterson, a master-planned community proposed by Terra Firma Entitlement Co. Partners include John Ramos, a former city councilman; Bruce Harrington, who gained fame persuading California voters to pass a DNA initiative; and Joe Hollowell, who helped mastermind Patterson's recent west-side surge.

That wave nearly doubled Patterson's population, to more than 16,000. The city was California's fifth-fastest growing in 2004 when it swelled by 13.4 percent, and the fastest in the county.

The Villages could bring 9,000 more residents.

A company hired by City Hall to run its overwhelmed building department gave Patterson a black eye in 2004 when it was discovered that an employee had stashed more than \$8 million in city checks instead of depositing them in the bank.

Builders at the time were eager to take advantage of proximity to Interstate 5 and rushed to develop KeyStone Pacific Business Park and the 1,300-home Walker Ranch subdivision.

The Villages of Patterson is similar in scope to those west-side projects, combined. Part of Terra Firma's sales pitch is bringing equilibrium by building on the east side.

"I always wanted to balance the commun-ity," said Ramos, whose projects include restoration of several older Patterson buildings.

Although a few thousand people have lived on the east side for decades, there is no school, no fire station, no police station. The Villages would bring them all, Ramos said.

Adding to that symmetry is Terra Firma's plan for a huge roundabout smack dab in the center of the Villages, identical in size to the circle that's graced downtown for nearly a century.

Streets would radiate from the roundabout like spokes from a wheel hub — just like the older model, Ramos said.

And the very center would be a town square, perhaps with ground-floor shops and other businesses mixed in with apartments and townhouses, according to plans.

"We want to pay homage to and celebrate the history of Patterson," Hollowell said, "which was a master-planned community from the very beginning."

Council approved environmental studies

Mexican brothers Pedro and Mariano Hernandez settled the area in 1844, and the town was founded by the Patterson family a few years later. In 1909, the Pattersons laid out a circular grid to evoke the grandeur of Paris or Washington, D.C., and began selling lots.

Stanislaus County leaders were happy then to welcome a new town, and at least one county leader seems fine with today's expansion.

"It looks like a really nicely planned community," said county Supervisor Jim DeMartini, whose district includes Patterson. "It's going to be a first-class development."

But Patterson officials haven't jumped on the bandwagon.

When the City Council voted two weeks ago to allow Terra Firma to move forward with environmental studies, the council required that Terra Firma pay the entire \$600,000 estimated cost. And Councilman Sam Cuellar made it clear that allowing studies does not equate to project approval.

"I want to make sure nobody got the preconceived notion that just because it's been presented, it was automatically approved," Cuellar said.

Councilwoman Becky Campo said she will give the Villages full consideration if developers make good on an oath to build scads of affordable homes.

"I have spoken to the developers," Campo said, "and I said they need to make it very, very attractive to the council."

In 1992, then-council members designated the entire northeast district for affordable housing. Most experts now agree smartly planned growth offers a variety of types and prices.

In 1995, council members adopted affordable housing rules mandating that all projects offer at least 10 percent of units at prices affordable to working-class people bringing home lower wages.

Such inclusionary zoning rules, as they are called, are vigorously resisted by the building industry and have not been adopted by most valley agencies. Modesto leaders, for example, nearly two years ago ordered studies as a precursor, but the city's planning staff has yet to start them.

Patterson gave builders an out, allowing them to pay \$319 per unit in fees to escape the burden of constructing lower-priced homes. The council raised the amount in 2001 to \$734 per home, but builders univer-sally have preferred to pay and be done with it.

"It's just a lot quicker and easier to pay a fee and move on," said Bill Zoslocki, president of the Building Industry Association of Central California.

With money pooled from the fees, the city recently sealed a deal with the Housing Authority of Stanislaus County to build 24 homes for seniors. They should open around November.

In the next few weeks, Patterson leaders are to consider raising the fee to an explosive \$27,000 per unit, "To encourage builders to actually build rather than paying the fee," said Joel Andrews, the city's housing coordinator.

That doesn't scare Terra Firma, the partners said.

"I remember where I came from," said Ramos, a Patterson barber for 16 years before launching into commercial development. He also farms 3,800 acres near Discovery Bay.

"Everyone," Ramos said, "should have the opportunity to buy a house."

Terra Firma will make clear from the start areas designated for apartments, duplexes and condos, said George Petrulakis, a Mo-desto land-use attorney representing the partnership.

Petrulakis said that should eliminate problems that occurred in east Modesto's Village I, where neighbors unaware of zoning angrily protested rental projects, killing some.

Zoslocki said requiring a percentage of affordable units forces builders to raise prices on the remainder. Charging more than they're really worth makes them less competitive.

Nontraditional home groupings planned

Terra Firma partners say they can afford to take losses in some parts because the Villages is planned over such a huge area.

DeMartini, the supervisor, also is impressed with Terra Firma's plans for homes in nontraditional groupings. A slick brochure shows green-court neighborhoods with six houses sharing a plaza-type back yard, and motor courts with eight houses ringing a common driveway.

"We don't want to create all the same stuff," Hollowell said. "We want to mix it up."

Petrulakis said the partners have not discussed whether to offer universal design options that enable people with physical disabilities to get around easily. They typically feature wider doorways, no-step entries and bathtubs with seats.

The company plans to sell parcels to builders who would be required to follow the master plan's spirit through design guidelines and standards, Hollowell said.

Council members later this year could review the Villages' studies and begin weighing whether to annex the large district.

Among the trickiest problems to resolve will be finding an adequate water source.

A 2000 study for a previous project concluded that Patterson, which relies entirely on wells, is on the brink of a massive saltwater intrusion from overpumping.

County supervisors recently agreed to partner with Patterson to study water supply options. City Manager Cleve Morris said his staff is exploring drawing water from the West Stanislaus, Del Puerto, Patterson or Turlock irrigation districts.

Terra Firma hopes to break ground on the Villages of Patterson in spring 2007.

Wood-burning ban program nears close

Modesto Bee, News and Notes, Monday, February 27, 2006

The San Joaquin Valley Air District's wood-burning program ends at midnight Tuesday. It will resume Nov. 1. The program lets the district prohibit people from lighting wood-burning fireplaces or wood stoves when pollution is forecast to reach levels unhealthy for everyone. On days when pollution is expected to reach levels unhealthy for groups such as those with chronic breathing problems, people are asked not to light wood-burning heating devices. There are no restrictions for today.

What is going into our lungs?

State begins measuring levels of 40 chemicals in valley air

By Juliana Barbassa, Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Saturday, February 25, 2006

PARLIER — With crop dusters buzzing the sky above, spray rigs stalking the fields and the occasional pesticide drift that hospitalizes scores of people, airborne chemicals are a fact of life in the farm towns of the San Joaquin Valley.

But no one knows what chemicals linger in the notoriously polluted air and whether long-term exposure could lead to increased rates of asthma, cancer or neurological problems.

To find out, the state Department of Pesticide Regulation began a yearlong air monitoring program this month to gauge levels of 40 airborne chemicals for the first time.

Monitoring program is the first step

While some farmers worry that the results could prompt stiffer regulations, doctors and school officials who deal with chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma said it's about time someone found out what rural residents are breathing.

"If there's something we can do to decrease these numbers, we need to move in that direction," said Dr. Rogelio Fernandez, who has seen increases in respiratory diseases in 15 years. "And the first step is to find out if there is something in the air."

The department has measured pesticides for shorter periods, but the \$1 million project is part of a comprehensive push to ensure that the chemicals needed to protect crops from weeds, insects and fungi don't harm the families that tend them, state officials said.

Pesticides are only one component of the noxious chemical soup that makes this valley — the nation's most productive farm region — also one of the nation's most polluted air basins. Car exhaust, soot from fireplaces, even gases rising from cow manure also contribute.

No state or federal agency has spelled out how much of the chemicals are safe to breathe. Determining what is in the air is the first step.

The agency, with help from the state's Air Resources Board, installed pumps that draw in air around three schools in Parlier, gauging levels of chemicals such as methyl bromide that are either harmful to human health or contribute to air pollution.

Parlier, a largely Latino town of about 12,000 about 20 miles southeast of Fresno, is the kind of place often overlooked by policy-makers in the state capital — and that's precisely why it was chosen, officials said.

"We want to ensure that our environmental laws provide a fair measure of protection for everyone who lives and works in our state," said Mary-Ann Warmerdam, the department's director. "We are particularly concerned about the health and welfare of children."

The economy here relies on farming, and in winter when there's nothing to plant or harvest, a third of adults don't work, making it one of the state's poorest towns.

Even grade-schoolers aware of problem

At César Chávez Elementary School, one of the monitoring sites, even second graders are aware that the air they breathe can be harmful.

"They know the stuff that's hurting them isn't always natural, that sometimes it's introduced by us," said second-grade teacher Paul Martinez.

With three or four children out of 20 with asthma in his class every year, Martinez has gotten used to bringing inhalers on field trips in case a child has an asthma attack.

And farmers, some chafing from recent air quality rules meant to curb their contribution to the region's dirty air, see the need for more testing.

"If we can find out if there are things we can do different, or better, it's very important," said Harold McClarty, whose family has grown peaches, plums, nectarines and citrus around Parlier for four generations. He has two children in local schools — one has asthma.

"It's our livelihood," he said, "but it's also our land, and our families."

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Saturday, February 25, 2006:](#)

Bad science on smoke dangers

Your editorial "Contaminant designation reminds us of secondhand smoke's danger" (Feb.22, Page B-6) is not based on the facts. You state, "The science behind the tobacco designation is irrefutable," and, "The smoke (smokers) send into the air has been linked to 400 additional lung cancer deaths a year in nonsmokers and 31,000 asthma attacks in children."

There are no credible scientific studies that demonstrate any link between secondhand smoke and lung cancer.

Two commonly quoted studies are one done by the Environmental Protection Agency and one by the World Health Organization. The EPA scientists concluded that secondhand smoke leads to 3,000 cases of lung cancer. However, a federal appeals court ruled that the EPA cherry-picked its data and ignored data that did not support its predetermined conclusion.

The title of the WHO study said there was a link between lung cancer and secondhand smoke. However, their own conclusion states there is no link. The study was purposefully titled, knowing most people would not read the entire study. To state that the science is "irrefutable" is irresponsible journalism.

You may think I am a smoker; I am not.

Raymond Wilson, Atwater

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Sunday, February 26, 2006:](#)

Sounding Board

Six Opinion section Sounding Board members were asked to comment on plans to revise metropolitan Bakersfield's general plan.

CITY, COUNTY WORK TOGETHER ON PLAN

It is very important to fully update the metropolitan general plan for the growth of greater Bakersfield. Our community is growing too rapidly for planning to be done on an approval-by-approval basis.

We need an urban policy directive that can come from a full update of the plan and address the cumulative effects of [air quality](#), agricultural land conversion and traffic.

In the recently conducted first quarter (first five years) update of the Vision 2020 Action Plan, 88 percent of the respondents indicated that it is "important" or "very important" for "the city and county to work together on land use and development so that growth is acceptable and desired." (See the full update at www.bakersfieldvision2020.com).

To move the process of fully updating the metropolitan Bakersfield general plan forward, city and county staff have already met with Vision 2020 to outline a unique and trendsetting public-private collaboration. Greater Bakersfield Vision 2020 will partner with the city and county for the purpose of enhancing participation by the general public in the update project.

The Vision 2020 framework and philosophy of openness and inclusivity will not only encourage public participation, but will provide for incorporation of many of the goals and action items identified in the original Vision 2020 Action Plan.

Community participants will have the opportunity of seeing their input actually translated into public policy. Increased public participation will also, ultimately, lend credibility to the outcome.

Sheryl Barbich is a management consultant, facilitator and community activist. She is the president of Vision 2020.

IT'S NO LONGER A SLEEPY TOWN

On a warm day in 1975, I was moving to Bakersfield from Los Angeles in a bright orange VW bug. The confident words of L.A. friends were still ringing in my ears: "You'll be back."

I didn't know what to expect, traveling up the steep, curvy Grapevine. All my driving experience had been on the frantic, but flat, Hollywood freeway. I entered Bakersfield through the eucalyptus grove lining the old highway. John Denver was singing "Country Roads" on the radio, as I arrived in what seemed like a magical land.

In contrast to the stressful big city, Bakersfield, I discovered, was filled with lots of nice people and minimal traffic congestion. Dodging fast cars in L.A. traffic had been a vital survival skill. But in Bakersfield, drivers rarely honked. Strangers made an effort to be courteous.

Now, however, 30 years later, Bakersfield isn't the peaceful town it was in the 1970s. Our community is growing in every direction. Even in east Bakersfield, Mount Vernon Avenue has its share of traffic jams, just like Rosedale Highway.

Bakersfield still offers special places of beauty -- mountains and open spaces that haven't been crowded out by housing development. These areas of open space need to be protected. Hopefully our city leaders will work hard to preserve our quality of life when pursuing economic growth. The metropolitan Bakersfield general plan should be revised to meet the needs of our rapidly expanding population.

Can we afford to take the impact of growth in Bakersfield for granted? Los Angeles was once also a sleepy farm town.

Kathleen Arnold Chambers is a mental health clinician for the Kern High School District.

AGRICULTURAL LAND MUST BE PRESERVED

Serious planning should be consider what our grandchildren (and their grandchildren) will need and want.

Unless Americans stop having children, our country will continue to grow and those children will need food, milk and clean air. The question is whether Kern County can continue to provide those things. Once we lose our precious agricultural land to development, it cannot be reclaimed.

Whether we like it or not, Bakersfield will become a big city. However, we can decide what kind of city we will be. I hope we will not choose more and more sprawl and congestion, [bad air quality](#) and struggles over water.

I have a vivid memory of seeing in 1984 a skyscraper in Japan alongside a lush rice field. We have not yet come to that point here. But we surely should think seriously about restricting the size of lots for new homes and promoting in-fill development closer to the center of town.

Allowing buyers to have whatever they can afford is unwise stewardship of the land.

Some of my environmentalist friends may disagree, but I also believe that, for the sake of future generations, we should give priority to preserving farm land over preserving a view.

Bruce Jones is a retired professor of religious studies at Cal State Bakersfield.

GROWTH PRESSURES FELT ON BAKERSFIELD

The Bakersfield City Council and Kern County Board of Supervisors need a major update to the 2010 Plan as amended in 2004. Bakersfield has flourished with growth and development, leapfrogged over rural areas and put pressure on our schools, police, fire, public services and labor and businesses of all kinds. This is an underlying reason for a new and improved version of the 2010 Plan. The new version must not duck these issues, but instead come up with a sensible "quality of life" plan for the future. Decisionmakers must not be swayed by outside pressures.

The dairies' expansion into our way of life certainly comes to mind. The influx and impact of the existing dairies and the ones waiting to come on stream, pending the outcome of the current environmental impact study, will measure the quality of life today and tomorrow. As sure as Tuesday follows Monday, housing is going to increasingly encroach on the dairies with each passing day. The revised 2010 Plan must address this contentious issue.

Our existing road and freeway system is inadequate to serve the growth and development of the past few years. A recent article in The Californian discussed pending road projects in 2006 and beyond. We all know how construction dates get set back for many reasons. This reason makes it even more critical that the city and county take an in-depth look at the 2010 plan as amended in 2004.

My mother used to say, "Haste makes waste." I feel that still applies today.

Dale A. Lindsley is retired after a lengthy career with Shell.

VISION 2020 GOALS NEED TO BE ENACTED

Soon the Bakersfield City Council, along with the Kern County Board of Supervisors, will meet to make a decision regarding revising Bakersfield's Vision 2020 Plan. Due to the growth and development in our community since the last revision to this plan in 2004, I have concerns that we are simply rushing to another revision when we really should be concerned with making the current vision our reality.

The 2020 plan is full of vision and ideas. One strategy states that we will "target growth companies that meet clean air requirements and create sustainable employment in jobs paying higher wages... Reduce emissions from mobile sources by improving traffic flow...Create buffer zones between city and farmland."

It also states that "Greater Bakersfield is a community with a clear set of development and land use...with policies that encourage in-fill development, while discouraging urban sprawl and

leapfrog development into prime agricultural lands. ... We actively seek to revitalize blighted areas."

I believe we are not following our current vision plan well in these areas (think big dairies, Wal-Mart and unbridled urban sprawl and traffic jams toward the canyon and to the west, while we still have blight and high-crime in the east, southeast and central sections of our city).

I am concerned that we still do not have affordable housing, health and child care. I would also like to see every child attend college and obtain a degree; however, I am worried that we continue to have inadequate school-to-career and vocational programs that will help prepare tomorrow's workforce here in Kern County.

A vision is a mental image of what organizations and leaders want to create in the future. It should reflect what is important and what we care about most. If used correctly, the 2020 Plan would be the framework that guides the actions and decisions of our leaders; nonetheless, it can and will become nothing more than empty promises and a doorstop if we do not follow through with actual decisions and actions that address and improve our quality of life here in Kern County. Our future -- our children, our grandchildren and our community-at-large -- deserve better than that.

Dr. Michelle McLean is the former principal of Horace Mann Elementary School. She is the author of several books on education.

DEMAND MORE FROM NEW HOME BUILDERS

There was a time, like it or not, in which this area was extremely hungry for growth. The city, county and private industry did much to encourage that growth, even though that appeared, at least to me, to be less demanding of developers than I think appropriate.

As an example, in the northwest, the site of very significant growth, we have parks that are not built for lack of funding -- meaning that developers were allowed to build without providing adequate infrastructure.

Things have now changed, at least as to housing. Today the cost of living in Los Angeles and environs is so high that we are experiencing enormous growth. If there was ever a time for governmental entities to demand high quality development with complete infrastructure support, the time is now.

This is the time to ensure both new homeowners' and the existing population's quality of life by providing parks, schools and the like.

David B. Stanton is a semi-retired Bakersfield attorney.

[Visalia Times-Delta editorial, Monday, February 27, 2006:](#)

Visalia would be ideal Bike City, USA

Thumbs up to the city of Visalia for adopting a bikeway plan that would ultimately connect all parts of the city through a bicycle path network.

When it is fully installed, the bikeway network would place a bike path on all of Visalia's major streets, both north and south. Every street in Visalia would be less than an eighth of a mile from a bike path. The city would have almost 70 miles of bike paths.

That would be a huge amount of bike paths for a city the size of Visalia, but it would be entirely warranted. After all, there are few cities anywhere that are as amenable to bicycle transportation

as Visalia. Its climate, flat terrain, and street grid, with almost all straightaways with high visibility, make Visalia the ideal biking city.

So far, though, the city has not taken full advantage of those characteristics. Visalia has about 20 miles of bike paths in various places around the city now. The problem is they don't always connect. Some of the bike paths are long and accessible, such as the one along Goshen Avenue from Mooney Boulevard all the way to Goshen. Others seem to exist all by themselves, such as the one on Mill Creek Drive that ends at Demaree Street and at Main Street. There is a core of streets flanking County Center Drive that have bike paths, but otherwise, they seem to be placed at random.

The bikeway plan would put bike lanes on all major streets and avenues, which would allow bike riders to travel from any part of the city to any other part on bike lanes. That's pretty much impossible now.

The city expects to complete the bikeway plan with grant money and matching funds from transportation impact fees of \$50,000 a year. It is entirely reasonable for the city to invest that amount of money for something that has such potential benefit, to traffic congestion, to health, to air quality and for recreation and fitness. This is an initiative that has been overdue, and we hope that the city can follow through on this plan once and for all.

[Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register editorial, Saturday, February 25, 2006:](#)
First step for Boswell's Yokohl Valley project was too quiet

Approval by the Tulare County Board of Supervisors of J.G. Boswell Co.'s request to begin applications for a planned community in the Yokohl Valley has officially set in motion what could become the largest urban development ever in the Central Valley.

The action by the supervisors on Feb. 7 allowed J.G. Boswell to begin formal application for the project. If this process were a hike, it would be the first tiny baby step in what promises to be a trek over many years and hundreds of miles. Before the whole thing is done, there will be enough studies, hearings, expert testimony and documents to pave the Yokohl Valley in paper.

Supervisors were simply telling the applicants they could proceed, at their own expense, to begin jumping through the dozens of bureaucratic hoops this project must negotiate. Considering they weren't giving permission for much more than a license to incur grief, supervisors probably figured their approval on Feb. 7 wasn't a big deal. But with so much at stake, we believe there should have been more acknowledgment of the public's concern about this development.

The Boswell Co., and its subsidiary the Eastlake Co., propose to develop 36,000 acres of range land Boswell owns in the Yokohl Valley, which lies east of Exeter and northeast of Lindsay nearly to Sequoia National Park. The property is used for grazing cattle and ranching. It adjoins some of the most picturesque and pristine foothills acreage in Tulare County.

Eastlake would turn about 60 percent of the property into a multi-use residential, commercial and resort complex. Part of the development would be a self-contained and self-sufficient community, with homes, schools, businesses and its own public safety and other services. Eastlake isn't saying how many homes or people might end up living there, but the company has built other huge planned communities in California, Arizona and Colorado that include as many as 10,000 homes. That size development here would make Yokohl Ranch Tulare County's third-largest city overnight, with as many as 50,000 residents.

Also in the plans are a provision for luxury, custom-built estate homes, and once again no numbers are available. Finally, Eastlake would build a world-class resort with attractions

developed around outdoor activities such as trail riding, hiking and climbing, mountain biking, golf and tennis, etc.

Boswell says it would also reserve most of the property for a working ranch as well as an environmental preserve.

At this point, those lofty plans are little more than a figment in some urban designer's head. But such a massive project, with so many potential repercussions on land use, environment, water, air quality, transportation, commerce, property values, agriculture, public safety and any number of other considerations, should stimulate a nice, long talk. Granted, there will be plenty of hot air to come. But while the supervisors were giving the green light to Boswell, they should have also been doing two other things:

First, it would have been prudent to ask Boswell to wait until the county's general plan update is completed, for a couple of reasons. At present, there is no explicit provision for this kind of master-planned community in the county's general plan. Does this mean the county needs to add one? And would it be tailored to this project? Will having this pending project influence the general plan update? We believe the general plan update ought to proceed without the shadow of this project hanging over it.

Secondly, we wish supervisors had acknowledged the outpouring of initial opposition to the Boswell plan and made some provision for responding to those critics. About 100 people showed up at the Feb. 7 meeting to object to the project. A couple hundred more sent or signed letters of protest.

That is significant opposition, especially at this early stage. Supervisors have an obligation to reassure residents that their interests will be looked after, if not protected.

It was a baby step, but it was also the first step, and often the first step is the most important. The way supervisors handled it made it seem as if they didn't think so.

[Letters to the Fresno Bee, Monday, February 27, 2006:](#)

Study of leaf blowers leaves some unconvinced

Exercise greater care

Spending \$68,000 to study what happens to dirt when it is blown into the air by a leaf blower -- wow! From my kitchen window I can tell you what happens.

The dirt is lifted from street level to four feet or more where it can reach the lungs of a child. Professional blowers send the dirt to the neighbor next door, or if blown around the corner into an alley, the neighbors can clean it up when the wind blows.

If the commercial leaf blowers would lower the blower down to three inches from the ground and then brush that dirt into a pile to be picked up, as my neighbor does, there would be fewer complaints.

I agree, however, with Scott Nester, planning director of the Valley air district and Susan Osborn [story Feb. 23]: A broom and a dust pan will take away dirt, not transport it.

Doris Larsen, Fresno

Ban them now

So they did a \$68,000 study on leaf blowers? Well, I could have done it for less than \$100.

Just roll down the windows of your car and open the doors and windows on your house. Now have the guy next door fire up his leaf blower for half the morning. Next, check your car and house. Don't tell me they don't pollute.

I say ban the leaf blowers now.

Joe Caetano, Fresno

[Letter to the Visalia Times-Delta, Monday, February 27, 2006:](#)

Overpopulation scheme threatens Earth

Various species of primates resembling cavemen lived in Africa as much as 1.7 million years ago. But homo sapiens evolved around 150,000 years ago and migrated out of Africa some 60,000 years ago.

By the year 1804 there were 1 billion humans on Earth. Humans reached the 6 billion mark in 1999.

The U.S. will celebrate a 300 million populace on June 27 this year.

Eventually we will have a population just like that in India. However the Earth's resources have been in decline most notably since 1990: grain production, fish as a food source per person, increase in carbon dioxide gas with drastic climate change results, air and water pollution, sufficient water for human use, the standard of living for the masses, and the list goes on and on.

Population observers describe the proponents of human overpopulation being No. 1. international banking and big business. These greed struck, shortsighted persons trade their increasing personal wealth for destruction of the planet. George Bush sold out 10 percent of the federal forests to real estate development . It takes only 10 more such presidents to eliminate the federal parks altogether.

The Muslim religion and next the Catholic religion are the next major proponents of overpopulation. Well before 2029 (see U.N. population statistics) the number of humans on this planet will begin its decline because of massive famines that already have been well under way for decades.

When (not if) world contamination with radioactive debris begins, the world production will decline even more rapidly.

American newspapers, controlled by the ruling class, are not permitted to publish dissent to the national policy which props up the myth that the ills of America are due to: Americans' romance with foreign oil, humans not trying hard enough to help ecology, recycle garbage, skimp on energy usage, drive a little less, volunteer to clean up nature (spitting in the ocean), Americans not giving their strained resources to overpopulated countries, etc. The buffoons of the state and federal governments empty governmental treasuries in the guise of unavoidable, consistently increasing spending programs and prod continuous industrial growth in order to charge, tax, fine every aspect of human activity to prop up their bankrupting policies.

The disappearance of middle class northern European life in America will continue to accelerate to be replaced by uneducated people living in relative poverty with much less personal freedoms and with more and more governmental control of their lives. People who multiply are not aware that they shouldn't. I love my country; it's the government I fear.

William S. Yale, Tulare

[Letter to the Visalia Times-Delta, Saturday, February 25, 2006:](#)

Ethanol could end nation's oil dependence

Since 1973, this country has been held hostage to oil by the Middle East, and now Venezuela is threatening with the same talk. This great country that we live in has E85 (85 percent ethanol, 15 percent petroleum) that can power our vehicles at a cheaper cost and less pollution.

This E85 is made from corn and could be made from other things that our farmers in the Midwest, and all over this country, could grow. Would that put our farmers back in business? Hello. We choose to send rockets up to Pluto, Jupiter or whatever. That is helping the working man make ends meet? We could become somewhat independent from the people that are trying to kill us.

Wake up, America. Brazil is building vehicles that can run on E85, but the nearest fueling station of this kind in California is in San Diego, even though we have a plant making this E85 in Goshen.

Could someone tell me what in the heck is going on?

We have a lot of smart people in this country, and we have not done anything in more than 30 years to avoid being held hostage from oil producers. Could someone tell me why?

Paul Menezes, Tulare