

## **Supreme Court Will Hear Pollution Case**

By Gina Holland, Associated Press Writer

In the S.F. Chronicle, Washington Post and other papers, Monday, May 15, 2006

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Supreme Court said Monday it would consider a landmark air pollution case that tests a Clinton administration strategy of using courts to pursue coal-burning power companies.

Justices next fall will take up a lower court decision that said power plants do not have to get permission to release more pollutants into the air when they modernize to operate for longer hours.

The Bush administration opposed the decision by the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, but in an odd move asked justices not to overturn it.

Solicitor General Paul Clement said the Environmental Protection Agency has responded to the ruling with new regulations.

Those proposed rules, announced last fall, have been criticized by environmental groups as pandering to the industry at the expense of Americans' health.

Environmental Protection Agency leaders contend they will prompt greater technology innovation.

Former President Clinton had used a Clean Air Act program to bring suits against 51 aging, coal-burning power plants.

Duke Energy Corp., based in Charlotte, N.C., was sued over improvements made at eight power plants in North Carolina and South Carolina. The appeals court said that although the plants would operate more hours and pollute more each year, the hourly rate of emissions wouldn't increase.

Among the biggest pollutants from coal-burning power plants are nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide, blamed for smog, acid rain and soot and other fine particles that lodge in people's lungs and cause asthma and other respiratory ailments.

Thirteen states backed environmental groups in urging the Supreme Court to intervene: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, and Vermont.

The case is Environmental Defense v. Duke Energy Corp., 05-848.

## **Oily foods fuel future**

by Jeff Hood

Stockton Record, Saturday, May 13, 2006

When the tractors start rumbling at George Nahas' ranch east of Lodi, he gives thanks to America's love of deep-fried foods. And he can smell that love, too.

Nahas converts used restaurant vegetable oil into homemade biodiesel that he mixes into regular diesel fuel. The result is cheaper diesel that doesn't pollute as much as pure petroleum.

"The smell of exhaust is the most horrible thing when you're driving a tractor," said Nahas, who started converting oil two years ago. "But the smell of french fries - now that smells good."

Nahas, 70, makes about 100 gallons of biodiesel a month. He mixes 1 gallon of vegetable fuel to 4 gallons of regular diesel so he doesn't have to modify his farm equipment's engines.

"The first time I tried it, I was skeptical," Nahas said at his Jack Tone Road ranch, which also is powered by solar electricity. "There's about an 8 to 10 percent reduction in power, but to me it's acceptable."

The original engines developed by Rudolf Diesel more than 100 years ago ran on peanut oil. With some modifications, today's diesel engines can run on 100 percent recycled vegetable oil.

Nahas picks up his oil about every two months from three area restaurants but is selective in what he'll take. Nahas won't take oil that's overused or from restaurants that use scouring stones to clean their equipment because the fine particles could end up in the fuel, damaging his engines.

The restaurants are happy they don't have to pay a company to haul it away, saving nearly \$50 a month, and Nahas gets vegetable oil he can convert to fuel for 90 cents a gallon, saving him more than \$200 a month at today's diesel prices. Those are currently at about \$3.35 a gallon.

He makes a few gallons at a time with the help of employee Scott Ranger. They mix sodium hydroxide - drain cleaner - with methanol, and combine that with the filtered vegetable oil. After several hours, the fuel oil separates from layers of starchy solids, glycerin and soap.

Finally, Nahas washes the diesel with water, which removes any leftover sodium hydroxide. After the oil and water separate, the cleaned diesel is ready to burn.

Nahas said some neighboring farmers have asked him if they could buy some of his fuel to try on their equipment, but he's declined because he doesn't want to be responsible for any engine damage.

"When you have a \$75,000 tractor, you don't want to experiment with it," Nahas said.

While ethanol is touted as a fuel of the future for passenger cars, it's only available at one gas station in the state - in San Diego. The closest biodiesel dealer is in the Bay Area, but Bob Aldrich of the California Energy Commission said he expects that will change soon, given the amount of diesel burned in Central Valley-based trucks and tractors.

As Nahas found, diesel engines can burn a mixture of up to 20 percent vegetable oil without being modified, Aldrich said. And a 100 percent veggie engine burns far cleaner than regular diesel, he said.

"Hydrocarbon levels are reduced almost 70 percent, carbon monoxide is reduced about 50 percent, and particulate matter is down about 50 percent," Aldrich said, noting that smog-forming nitrogen oxides are elevated slightly.

The state and federal government, however, don't see the difference in their approach to taxes. Biodiesel is taxed at the same rate as OPEC oil in California: 42.4 cents a gallon in state and federal taxes, plus sales tax.

Aldrich said Nahas isn't alone. Although he didn't have figures, he said "a lot" of people are making their own diesel from free restaurant waste. He expects restaurants will start charging for the privilege when demand for used vegetable oil increases.

"Hey, they can start paying that any time, any way we can make that work," said Mike Metcalf, owner of Lodi's Avenue Grill, who pays a Stockton company to haul away his oil each month.

And consumers can do their part, too. No need to feel guilty about eating that order of extra-large fries. You're doing it for the environment and America's energy self-sufficiency.

## **Spending proposal adds up for Valley**

Hank Shaw, Capitol bureau chief  
Stockton Record, Saturday, May 13, 2006

SACRAMENTO - Nearly \$5 billion in unexpected tax revenue is letting Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger pay down the state's debt early, boost school spending and provide cost-of-living increases for state services. The act pleases both Democrats and Republicans, who said they may finally be able to pass a budget by the June 15 deadline.

"Today, I am a very happy governor," Schwarzenegger said.

The San Joaquin Valley stands to benefit from some of this largesse.

Schwarzenegger wants to expand K-12 education funding at low-performing schools, capture hundreds of thousands of children eligible but not enrolled for state-subsidized health care, boost flood-control spending, add judges in fast-growing counties, combat methamphetamine use and increase enforcement of pesticide laws.

Perhaps the biggest bonus for the Valley - \$500 million to repair state levees - was passed last week by the Legislature.

Other regional highlights include \$20 million to fight meth in the Valley, \$25 million to retire old, smog-belching school buses - San Joaquin County has the second-largest fleet of such vehicles in California - and \$100 million to subsidize local levee repair efforts.

Democrats were generally positive about Schwarzenegger's proposal.

"There's no doubt that the governor's election year budget reflects Democratic priorities," Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez said. "But with prosperity comes an obligation to middle-class and low-income Californians who have suffered from the governor's harsh cuts of the past two years. Democrats will tweak this budget to meet that obligation while being fiscally prudent."

Area Republicans also praised the plan, especially Schwarzenegger's decision to pay debt early.

"We need to pay off old debt and save for the future," said Assemblyman Alan Nakanishi, R-Lodi. "The governor showed great restraint by not filling the budget with pork projects. Now it's time for the Legislature to show similar discipline."

Much of the new money comes from taxes on capital gains and stock options, much like that which fueled state spending during the dot-com boom. Unlike that period, however, Schwarzenegger has vowed to restrict new, ongoing spending the state may not be able to afford when the economy dips again.

Still, ongoing spending accounts for nearly half of the extra money, thanks largely to state and federal mandates.

Ninety-six percent of the \$131.1 billion budget is set by these formulas, according to the state Department of Finance. Most of it is school spending, followed by human services, health care and road-building funds.

Schwarzenegger, who says his budget will reduce the state's current level of overspending from \$3.7 billion to \$2.5 billion - although it is expected to rise again next year to \$3.5 billion - said he could knock the deficit down further but for these mandates.

The governor's budget does not raise taxes, but he dismissed any talk of cutting them.

"I think that we are far away from really going in that direction," he said. "We still have to pay off a lot of debt."

Details of the budget proposal are available at [www.ebudget.ca.gov](http://www.ebudget.ca.gov).

## **Big victory for Hunters Point activists**

**As PG&E closes its old, smoky power plant, the neighborhood breathes a sigh of relief**

Leslie Fulbright, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Monday, May 15, 2006

The multicolored smoke that invaded Hunters Point residents' lives and lungs for decades has disappeared in a treasured victory for those who waged what seemed like an endless fight to get rid of an outdated power plant.

The 77-year-old Pacific Gas and Electric Co. power plant on Evans Avenue officially closes today.

People who live in the public housing directly across the street and other homes nearby began organizing more than 25 years ago -- with protests, lawsuits and countless meetings -- to rid their neighborhood of what came to represent the area's disproportionate share of San Francisco's heavy industry and of the city's asthma and cancer cases.

"To say the least, I am elated," said Marie Harrison, a member of the Huntersview Mothers Committee who got involved a decade ago, after realizing that lung-clogging particulate matter from the plant was drifting through her grandson's bedroom windows. "Our children have suffered chronic nosebleeds and asthma attacks as a result of that plant.

"I am giddy, like a little kid, that we got that monster out of our community."

Though many in the neighborhood say they face many other issues -- dilapidated housing, gang crime and unemployment -- pollution, from many sources in addition to the PG&E plant, is a priority.

"There are other things that we have to deal with, but now we have one milestone behind us," Harrison said. "This is just the beginning."

Residents celebrated outdoors Friday night with piles of grilled chicken and hot dogs and sparkling cider served in plastic cups.

Most significant, said resident Tessie Ester, was that the kids could be outside jumping rope and playing football and that, even with a strong breeze, she could be certain they weren't inhaling fumes from the power plant.

"The smoke has stopped," Ester said. "When I look over at those stacks, and there is nothing coming out, I can't help but cry. We should never have been forced to live like that. Maybe now we can get rid of the inhalers and really start to enjoy life."

A city health department study in 2000 showed that residents of Hunters Point and the adjoining Bayview neighborhood were more than twice as likely to be hospitalized with asthma as city residents overall. Bayview-Hunters Point and Potrero Hill also have the highest air pollution emissions in the city, according to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports.

Other studies have found elevated rates of diabetes and breast and cervical cancer in the area, although no study has directly linked any specific source of pollution to residents' health problems. PG&E has denied that the plant posed a risk to public health, noting that no studies directly connected it to the ailments.

Activists, in a study funded by the San Francisco Foundation, reported that emissions from the plant included some of the neighborhood's highest levels of nitrogen oxides, key ingredients in ground-level ozone, as well as carbon monoxide and volatile organic compounds, an element of smog, among other chemicals known to cause health problems.

Terri Williams, whose 5-year-old daughter, Tori, has asthma, said the Evans Avenue plant's closure was a relief.

"Hopefully, she won't be breathing funny anymore," she said of her daughter.

The yearslong battle to close the plant, one of California's oldest, was led by activists and others, many of them mothers-turned-environmentalists who live near the site. They say pollutants from the power plant led to rampant cancer and asthma in the community.

Hunters Point is in the southeastern part of the city, and most of its residents are low-income and nonwhite. Reports over the years, including a landmark study by the United Church of Christ's Commission for

Racial Justice, have documented that communities of color are located disproportionately near toxic sites.

"The plant was a symbol of environmental racism," said Bradley Angel, executive director of Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, a mobilization group that helped with the fight. "It was across the street from homes dealing with so many pollution sources."

Marcus Hill Colbert, who has lived in the neglected housing projects at Hunters Point since he was born, said the proximity of the plant and that housing should not be surprising.

"They are not going to put society's castaways in the most beautiful place America has to offer," the 26-year-old said. "No, they put us here instead."

In addition to the plant, the neighborhood includes a federal Superfund site -- the former Navy shipyard -- plus a sewage treatment plant, dozens of industrial businesses and two heavily traveled freeways.

"

We are bombarded with pollution," Harrison said. "It's a wonder people live here."

PG&E agreed to close the plant in 1998, but company officials said they first had to find alternate sources of the 400 megawatts of backup power the plant supplied. A new transmission line from plants on the

Peninsula now does that, said Gregg Fishman of the California Independent System Operator, which runs the state's electrical grid.

"There was a series of things that needed to be done before the plant was no longer necessary," Fishman said. "I am not an air quality expert, but I can say it was one of the least efficient power plants.

"We shared community concerns about the facility, but it was required until we made significant upgrades."

That work took longer than activists had hoped, and they recently began to step up their efforts again, even planning to blockade the plant.

Students at Gloria R. Davis College Preparatory Academy wrote letters to the mayor about their asthma. And neighborhood mothers continued to research the hazards.

"Once we educated ourselves and realized how many illnesses we could get, the more we realized the biggest problem was the power plant," said Harrison. "We had to take action because nobody was going to do it for us."

PG&E has promised to clean the soil on the land to the standard acceptable for building housing.

"The plant will be torn down, and there will be a total cleanup," said Darlene Chiu, a PG&E spokeswoman. "One of the reasons we shut it down is because the area has become more populated. We understood it was time to move, but we had to ensure there was enough power."

The city has first rights to buy the property from PG&E, and the mayor has said he wants to turn it into a hub for clean-tech businesses.

At the party, San Francisco Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi praised the community effort.

"This did not happen because of current politicians," he said. "It was a grassroots effort by people who wanted the same **air** that everyone else has."

"It was public pressure and the escalation of protests that finally forced PG&E and the state to move forward," Angel said. "This campaign was a success in bringing people together, crossing ethnic and cultural lines."

"People vowed not to give up."

## **Fresno, Clovis partner on roads Intersection at Willow and Shepherd to be widened.**

By Marc Benjamin / The Fresno Bee  
Monday, May 15, 2006

The cities of Fresno and Clovis are chipping in to reconstruct and widen a road where the two are converging with new development.

The \$2.2 million project will widen the Shepherd and Willow avenues intersection and replace the existing four-way stop with traffic signals.

As the two cities embark on the road-widening project, the city of Fresno also has reached agreement with a prominent farmer who in 1999 denied Fresno access to land northwest of the intersection for expansion of the Sugar Pine Trail linking Clovis to Woodward Park.

The road work is being paid for with a federal grant worth \$1.78 million as long as additional funding comes from both cities. Fresno and Clovis will each chip in \$200,000. If the project's costs exceed \$2.2 million, the two cities are expected to make up the difference.

The northeast corner of the intersection is in Fresno County, but the county, while supporting the project, is not putting in any money. The county's part of the intersection will be annexed into Clovis in about two years when Clovis adds its northwest urban center.

Mike Kirn, Fresno's assistant director of public works, said the grant, which comes from the federal Congestion Management and Air Quality program, is only for road improvements.

That work includes traffic signals, dual left-turn lanes, median islands and curb cuts for pedestrians.

"There will be a full-blown pedestrian crosswalk that will ultimately enhance the trail's functionality," Kirn said. "It can only help the whole area from a trail perspective and a roadway perspective."

The traffic lights will have a function that will allow drivers in emergency vehicles to override the signals.

The road funding will not provide money for trail work.

Ultimately, the trail will go north to Copper Avenue past the new Clovis Unified education center and the State Center Community College District facility. Both school projects will likely open next year.

The land in question was supposed to be the final link to the Sugar Pine Trail, but the paved trail now has a half-mile dirt gap because of an ownership dispute that was recently resolved.

Bruce M. Brown, for property owner Pat Ricchiuti, said a trail agreement has been reached and final documents are being filed. "There will be the ability for the city, at whatever time they want to, to put a trail in on that corner and on the north side of Shepherd Avenue and west side of Willow," Brown said.

Brown said the city will have a 60-foot-wide space for the half-mile dirt stretch for the trail and other uses.

Brown said no money changed hands in the right of way deal, which involved realigning some property lines.

The city of Fresno had \$186,000 to construct that portion of trail in 1999 but had only a year to use it.

For the moment, the unpaved half mile is "a dangerous gap in the trail system," said Mark Keppler, a board member for Tree Fresno, which recently merged with the Coalition for Community Trails. "It's taken too long to resolve, but the good news is that it will be resolved."

Fresno Council Member Jerry Duncan, whose district includes the property, said: "From what I have seen so far, I think it will work out for everyone and we can get the trail finished."

Keppler said the city of Fresno will need to look for ways to keep the trail from having dangerous crossings.

"As long as they don't chop it up with driveways," he said, explaining that the lingering issue is how vehicles will cross the trail to get to commercial properties.

The city of Clovis' efforts to protect the trail involved requiring hardware superstore Lowe's to pay for two tunnels on the east side of Clovis Avenue that emerge on the property.

For a project at Willow and Nees avenue, Clovis also required developers Don Burgess and Spalding Wathen to incorporate the trail into their project along the edge of their property.

"We wanted some strong connections between the trail and the center with patios and courtyards to pull the two land uses together," Clovis City Planner Dwight Kroll said. The development includes courtyards close to the trail, and the developers were required to provide landscaping along the trail.

By connecting the trail and the Willow-Nees development, the city expects more trail users to walk or ride a bicycle to the project instead of using motorized vehicles, Kroll said.

Keppler suggested the city of Fresno take a similar approach, working with developers to improve the trail.

"You have to have the political will, foresight and discipline to get it done," Keppler said.

## **Creative flowers**

### **Spano Park garden shows Valley statistics in living color.**

By Felicia Cousart Matlosz / The Fresno Bee

Monday, May 15, 2006

At first glance, the triangular flower bed looks like any other — lovely shades of marigolds and alyssum cover part of the ground, while the rich green of new fescue adorns the rest of it.

But take a longer look at the flowers, and you're struck by the shapes they take: They form a bar chart reflecting statistics specific to Fresno County, in areas such as poverty and air quality.

This is a "statistic garden," the creation of San Francisco-based artist Amy Balkin, and it's on display at Spano Park, overlooking the San Joaquin River in northwest Fresno.

The project, which officially opened Saturday, is part of the Off-Site series of contemporary art organized by the Fresno Metropolitan Museum while the museum's main exhibition space is undergoing major renovation. The series also is supported by a grant from The James Irvine Foundation.

Susanneh Bieber, the Met's curator of art, says flower beds are a traditional part of town halls and city halls, a show of civic pride. She says Balkin's proposal attracted her because it takes "something that's in the vernacular language of people but takes that and really inverts it a bit, twists it a bit, transforms it a bit."

She says people love flowers and their beautiful colors. The visual attraction, Bieber says, will be an entry way to look closer: "Look at the shapes, look at the different ideas of what's actually behind it."

Balkin, 37, has created other public projects. For example, she was a collaborator on the "Invisible-5," which its Web site describes as a project that "investigates the stories of people and communities fighting for environmental justice" along the lengthy Interstate 5 corridor in California.

For the Off-Site project, Balkin uses Fresno-specific data.

"As someone who comes as an outsider into a place, how do you know a place?" Balkin says during a recent morning when she and a few others lay sod around yellow, orange and red marigolds and purple and white alyssums, all flowers hardy enough to take the Valley's summer heat.

"I was interested in finding out the meaning of a place through environmental data," she says.

The different colored marigolds make up the bars of the "bar chart." For example, a bar of red marigolds represents the percentage of people in Fresno who live in areas of concentrated poverty (citing the 2000 U.S. Census) — 44%.

Signs serving as "keys" for the marigolds will explain each bar. The alyssums make up the scale that borders the bottom and left side of the bar chart.

Spano Park is overseen by the city of Fresno's Parks and Recreation Department.

The small park is at 8050 N. Palm Ave., at Nees Avenue. It sits in an interesting area — next to a three-story building of steel and reflective glass overlooking the San Joaquin River. Other land in the immediate area is undeveloped, but not for long.

"It's so much on the border of things," Bieber says.

Even though the park is in a quiet spot, it's not without visitors. The park has six metal picnic tables and benches, a couple of water fountains and some young trees. Hilary Kimber, a parks supervisor for the city, says it's well-used by people in the area.

She also says she was excited about the project because there isn't much in planted material in the park. And the garden is something that can be seen and shared.

"I thought it was a nice beginning to kick off an era of working with other groups," Kimber says.

And what does Balkin hope people experience when they see the garden?

"I suppose a sense of place — on more than one level."

[Modesto Bee columnist, Friday, May 12, 2006:](#)

### **Is belly dancing the worst problem faced by Stanislaus?**

By Brad Barker

Oh, we got trouble, my friends. Right here in Stanislaus County. Trouble with a capital "T" that rhymes with "B" and that stands for belly dancing.

First comes peek-a-boo, then the hokey-pokey and now full-force belly dancing with tassels flying. Mysterious Middle Eastern movements leading us down the road to degradation.

Oh, we got lots of trouble: youngsters peeking through library meeting-room doors, brazen women with veils and finger cymbals and foreign music — music that'll lead your sons and daughters into the clutches of animal instinct.

Listen, my friends, undulating midribs are Satan's playgrounds. Parents, heed my warning. Watch for signs of moral decay. The minute your daughter leaves the house, does she perform an intense body shimmy? What about the cobra neck slither? Does she have a positive body image? Does she use words like physical and mental wellness? If so, my friends, we got trouble.

A chorus line of county supervisors begins to chant: "Trouble, trouble, trouble ..." Fade to black, and apologies to Meredith Willson, who wrote the lyrics for "The Music Man."

The lead character in that musical, Harold Hill, used his sanctimony as a con. What's up with our county supervisors?

Yes, we have trouble. Comments made by elected officials and their appointed county chief executive officer reveal bottomless chasms of misunderstanding about ethnic folk dance and library programming. Yet they feel the need to impose their confusion on the county library.

Supervisor Jim DeMartini reacted quickly: "I complained about it as soon as I saw it," he said. "The mission statement of the library is for literacy programs." Supervisor Bill O'Brien wants tax dollars used for literacy and books. "The library, to me, is about books."

The library mission statement is posted prominently on the library's Web site: "The mission of the library is to foster the love of reading and open the door to knowledge."

Across this nation every year, thousands of public library programs are offered exploring a wide variety of topics. Programming is a traditional library service. Why are our supervisors so uninformed?

When county CEO Rick Robinson canceled the belly dancing program last month, he asked the library to postpone other programs that did not have "a direct nexus to library activities."

As a resident of Stanislaus County, I have a question for our supervisors and their CEO: Why don't you find a direct nexus to solving genuine problems in this county? Your constituents do not rank the menace of belly dancing among their concerns.

Try to stay focused: Stanislaus County is ranked first in the nation in auto theft. The American Lung Association says our air quality is among the worst in the nation. The cuts in county health services have impacted hospital emergency rooms severely. The county animal shelter is a disgrace. A poll of county voters put growth as the most important issue. Despite the developer money in county politics, your constituents want you to control sprawl and protect farmland.

Come on. Is this belly dancing thing an attempt to distract voters from real troubles? Yes, Troubles with a capital "T," rhymes with "D," and stands for: Do something that matters.

[Fresno Bee columnist, Sunday, May 14, 2006:](#)

### **Is Harlan Ranch evolution's pinnacle?**

By Bill McEwen

With apologies to Jim Wasserman, I want to be Harlan Ranch Man.

It was Wasserman, a former Bee columnist, who identified *Habitatus Fresnanus* and charted his evolution from Tract Man to Alluvial Man and so on.

Remember Tract Man? He thought speed bumps would save the neighborhood.

Downtown Man is close kin to San Francisco Giants Fan Man: He waits and waits for next year. For eternity.

In fact, last I checked, Downtown Man was fossilized in the big vault at the vacant Bank of Italy building.

Then there was High-Rise Man. He held promise, only to be a figment of some spaced-out planner's imagination. High-Rise Man, we were told, would ride the elevators of magnificent residential towers on Blackstone Avenue.

If High-Rise Man roams the Fresno plains, he's disguised as a homeless guy sleeping next to a shopping cart in front of a half-empty strip mall.

Harlan Ranch Man? He's as real as a grizzly kissing a polar bear.

And 10 times faster than Copper Man, whose time has been delayed by lawsuits, political squabbles and lines drawn in the sand.

Harlan Ranch developers Leo Wilson and Kevin Castanos went public with their plans for the \$1 billion residential and commercial project just two years ago.

Now Harlan Ranch Man is looking at model homes and calculating the commute if he averages 75 on Freeway 168.

The television commercials have something to do with my Harlan Ranch Man envy.

They're good. Really good.

Harlan Ranch, you see, isn't any garden-variety 400-acre, 1,300-home subdivision.

It's a lifestyle!

It's master-planned!

It's at the doorstep of the Sierra!

Doesn't everyone deserve a lifestyle? Doesn't everyone deserve to be master-planned? Doesn't everyone want to sleep well at night knowing their kids attend Clovis Unified?

And while we're at it, doesn't everyone deserve the pristine Harlan Ranch air pictured in the commercial?

The kind of air we only get after a torrential downpour has scrubbed away the grime and the grit and the kitchen sink?

All hail the evolution of Harlan Ranch Man.

He's innovative. He's pragmatic. And he can claim to be green even if he drives a Lincoln Navigator.

That's because his haunts will have walking trails, parks, shopping, a community center and a 40-foot-wide imitation Huntington Boulevard median.

While Tract Man looks at six sets of speed bumps on his street and wonders what the heck he was thinking, Harlan Ranch Man will bike to the park and the store.

While Alluvial Man, former king of the bluff dwellers, worries about being labeled inner city, Harlan Ranch Man will know he's fat and happy in equity city for at least 20 years.

Copper Man, Running Horse Man and Fancher Creek Man are lurking.

All must be smart and nimble to catch that beast in the east, Harlan Ranch Man.

He's looming large, coming soon and promising smart urban sprawl.

[Modesto Bee commentary, Saturday, May 13, 2006:](#)

### **Take the train -- it pays off in beauty, better for valley air**

By Megan Knize

I always have been somewhat skeptical of public transportation in the Central Valley. Our meager selection of buses and trains struck me as too complicated, costly and inconvenient. But last month, when gas prices remained stubbornly high — and I needed a week of sunshine at my grandparents' house in Southern California — I happily boarded an Amtrak train.

Though the trip took nine hours when I could have driven in six, I would not hesitate to do it again. In fact, I expect that as increasing numbers of valley residents turn to public transportation, they will be pleasantly surprised.

The Amtrak Web site boasts the train is "the best way to see America." After my trip, I've decided that taking Amtrak is hands-down the best way to see the Central Valley. I boarded the San Joaquin in Stockton and picked a window seat on the second level. As we traveled through Modesto, Merced, Fresno and Hanford, I began to think that such a train trip should be required for all valley schoolchildren.

These pastoral landscapes are a huge part of the valley's cultural identity. It's hard to remember that when so many families live in walled communities far from cows and alfalfa.

There were several pleasant surprises, including the cost of my trip. After living abroad last year, I noted that train travel from Stockton to Santa Barbara costs roughly the same as a trip covering a similar distance in Europe. And when I consider how relaxed I felt because I was not driving, the gas money I saved and the pollution I prevented, the train was an even better deal. In addition, the conductors were friendly and my fellow passengers respectful. There was plenty of space and a quiet atmosphere to read and daydream.

The only bad parts of my journey were the delays. Our conductor told us that freight trains have priority on railroad tracks, so once we left Merced, we had to make room several times to let other trains pass. Because I wasn't in any hurry, I enjoyed stopping for an extended view and a chance to feel the warm sun through the window.

Those who are hesitant to take public transportation argue that they are not prepared to lose their ability to choose when to go and when to arrive. They will say it is impractical to ask passengers to squander an extra three hours on a train. This might be true.

I ask for patience and foresight, because I have seen public transportation work very well in Europe and North Africa. I know it can work here if we create a demand. As more people seek public transportation because driving is no longer cost-effective, Amtrak will have a greater presence on U.S. rails. This hopefully means delays will decrease and transportation services will better reflect consumers' needs.

As the summer travel season starts, everyone should incorporate some form of public transportation into every trip. It can be as simple as using BART to get to the Bay Area or taking Amtrak up to Sacramento.

Taking a train makes a lot of sense from economic and environmental perspectives. Plus, it allows travelers and commuters to relax and enjoy our gorgeous California views — isn't that what summer is all about?

*Knize is a first-year student at University of California at Davis School of Law and a former visiting editor.*