

Air-pollution fee program sputters Funds collected far less than anticipated

By Alex Breitler, Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Thursday, May 15, 2008

A unique rule that charges developers in the San Joaquin Valley for air pollution emitted by vehicles netted \$13million in its first year - far less than air-quality experts had expected.

The money is used to offset pollution from the increased traffic that results from new neighborhoods, shopping centers and other developments.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District had expected to collect about \$200million over the program's first three years. The quiet start may be due to a slowdown in development around the Valley, officials said.

How it works

- Developers are encouraged to reduce the effects of air pollution by putting homes or businesses near bus stops, building bicycle paths and sidewalks, increasing energy efficiency and other strategies.
- If after these actions are taken, emission levels are still above a certain threshold, the developers pay a fee. The amount depends on the quantity of pollution.
- The money the district collects is used to prevent pollution elsewhere.
- The program includes more than merely homes and businesses of a certain size. Schools, government buildings, hospitals and industrial properties are also subject to fees.

The fees the district collected were used to upgrade farmers' diesel irrigation pumps. That reduced pollution by about 855 tons in the past year, the district said.

"That's pretty significant," said Dave Warner, the district's director of permit services. "Measuring it by tons of emissions, we feel it was extremely successful."

But the rule, first of its kind in the nation, remains under fire by builders who say it's yet another financial burden that will be passed on to home buyers. A lawsuit filed last year by several building-oriented groups is pending.

The heart of the matter is this: Should developers pay for pollution indirectly linked to their projects?

Yes, said Kathryn Phillips, who follows air-quality issues for the conservation group Environmental Defense.

"Everybody recognizes air pollution is a costly hazard," she said. "There are ways to control it, and everybody ought to be part of the solution."

The hope is that builders will include pollution reduction in their plans, she said. An example would be placing a new neighborhood near mass transit to reduce the number of miles driven by residents.

Developers can reduce or avoid the pollution fees with steps such as these. But builders are already bound by city general plans that take air quality into consideration, said Nathan Magsig, an affordable-housing developer in the Fresno area.

In a worst-case scenario, the rule could add \$1,772 to the cost of a typical home by 2008 and from \$872,000 to \$1.3million to the cost of a typical shopping mall. The district uses a formula to determine exact fees.

Magsig, whose Coalition for Urban Renewal Excellence is among the groups suing the air district, said much of that cost will be borne by the buyer.

His question: What good is it to solve the air-quality problem if the poor have been priced out of the housing market?

"If you really want to get at our air-quality problem, it's going to require a tax on people who drive vehicles," Magsig said.

River Islands at Lathrop, an 11,000-unit development on Stewart Tract in south San Joaquin County, might not qualify for the pollution fees since plans were in the works before the rule became final.

In general, however, builders might be required to upgrade their plans and to pay a fee - a double whammy, River Islands project director Susan Dell'Osso said. "It doesn't seem quite fair," she said.

The air district cannot regulate tailpipe emissions directly - that's the job of the state and federal governments. It says it does have authority to charge developers under a 1988 state law.

The Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District is studying a similar fee, a spokeswoman said.

Despite the slow start, San Joaquin air officials said they still hope to meet the program's ultimate goal: reducing pollution by 10 tons a day within 10 years.

Tulare Co. resists rail line cut

Company's plan to quit 39-mile route could stall small towns' economies.

By Tim Bragg

The Fresno Bee, Thursday, May 15, 2008

EXETER -- A railroad company's plan to abandon a 39-mile rail line could stall economic growth in this small town and others along the route, Tulare County officials say.

The move also has Valley transportation experts worried that more rail lines could disappear, which could hurt development of mass transit and efforts to reduce pollution.

"If they come in and pull up the rail and ties, it's gone, and we can't get it back," said Tulare County Supervisor Mike Ennis, who represents areas where the rail line operates. "Rail access is important to attracting more businesses to the county."

Officials at Tulare Frozen Foods, which packages frozen broccoli, cauliflower and spinach at the former Lindsay Olive plant, said it had planned to ship 150 carloads on the rail line this year.

The company ships about 70% of its product by rail, said Jim Fickert, the company's chief operating officer. If the rail line is abandoned, the company, which employs about 150 people in Lindsay, would have to change the way it does business, making future Lindsay expansion unlikely, he said.

"It would double our transportation costs if we had to do it all by truck. It's something we can't handle right now," Fickert said

Exeter-based San Joaquin Valley Railroad filed a plan to abandon 39 miles of rail line that run along the county's east side between Exeter and Jovista near Kern County. The company operates about 200 miles of rail lines in Fresno, Kings, Kern and Tulare counties.

Railroad company officials, through federal government filings, say the 39-mile portion that serves Ducor, Exeter, Lindsay, Porterville, Richgrove, Strathmore and Terra Bella is not economically viable, and too difficult to sell.

According to paperwork filed by the company, abandonment would allow the railroad to avoid annual operating costs of about \$119,765 for the 39-mile section. It also could sell the used rail, ties, spikes and other materials for about \$760,000. Only one customer, Tulare Frozen Foods, remains on the entire section, according to the railroad.

Railroad officials in Exeter and at the Boca Raton, Fla., headquarters of its parent company, Rail America Inc., didn't return calls seeking comment.

Tulare County officials oppose the idea and will conduct a study to see whether there is a way to save the rail line, while seeking to delay abandonment proceedings for 90 days, to determine whether a deal is possible.

The federal Surface Transportation Board is charged with balancing economic burdens on railroads with the public's need for service. Permission usually is given to abandon unprofitable rail lines, though public agencies and private parties can force them to be sold instead.

Board officials declined to comment on the San Joaquin Valley Railroad's abandonment application, citing a policy against commenting on such matters before the board makes a decision.

But the board's Web site shows it approved the railroad's application for a shortened abandonment process for a 9-mile portion between Exeter and Strathmore. A decision on the rest of the line will take longer because of environmental concerns.

The board could make a decision as soon as next month.

Valley counties that have branch lines served by San Joaquin Valley Railroad are keeping close watch on Tulare County's efforts.

"We're interested in preserving any kind of opportunity for economic development in the area," said Clark Thompson, a planning coordinator with the Council of Fresno County Governments. "We want to maintain the rail corridors we have for future transportation use. Even if there's no freight activity, we want to preserve them for a possible passenger rail system as our communities continue to grow."

Thompson said Fresno County has lost lines that served Clovis, Orange Cove and Parlier. If more Fresno County abandonments are filed, officials would consider pursuing a challenge similar to Tulare County.

Paul Saldaña, president and chief executive officer of the Tulare County Economic Development Corp., said he hopes Tulare County can reach an agreement to purchase or lease the line.

Ted Smalley, executive director of the Tulare County Association of Governments, said at least five companies have contacted local officials about buying the line.

"If people are willing to buy it, it means the rail line has a financial viability," he said.

Saldaña said at least 12 companies are interested in future use of the line if the cost is reasonable.

"We have a number of clients who are requesting rail service as a precursor to locating here," he said.

The issue, Saldaña said, is a \$950 surcharge on each car shipped. The railroad, in the abandonment paperwork, said the surcharge pays for rail maintenance on the line south of Exeter.

Tuff Stuff Products came to the area on the promise of rail service. The company, which makes plastic pellets and products such as floor mats, moved into a former packinghouse in Terra Bella.

General manager Max Lee said the company could ship four times as many pellets in a rail car than in a single truck trailer. But because of current surcharges, shipping by rail is not cost effective for the company.

"With [rising] diesel rates, it's become a lot more expensive to ship," Lee said.

County officials said they hope the federal government will be sympathetic to keep the line open as an economic engine in an area with high unemployment.

"I haven't heard a train whistle in Porterville in a couple of months," Ennis said. "I hope we didn't hear the last one."

Workshops seek input to Kings' growth vision

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Wednesday, May 14, 2008

A coalition of local governments is holding a series of workshops this week through next week to guide public input on designing Kings County's growth roadmap for 2050. "The purpose of the blueprint workshops is to gather public input into the options presented for future growth scenarios in Kings County out to the year 2050," said Terri King, executive director of the Kings County Association of Governments.

A similar process was used during the development of growth scenarios. Now the officials want to know what the public thinks of what they came up with.

"Public input throughout this project is of critical importance to its success," King said. "For this phase of the Blueprint project, several topical future scenarios will be presented at four workshops conducted in each jurisdiction, which began on May 13 in Avenal, where the public may view the maps and answer a simple survey on their opinions for each scenario."

The first workshop was held Tuesday in Avenal.

Another workshop will take place today from 4:30-6 p.m. at the Lemoore Chamber of Commerce, 300 E St., Lemoore.

Hanford will have its own on Thursday between 4-5:30 p.m. in the Ag Extension Multipurpose Room, 680 N. Campus Drive. A Corcoran workshop will be held on Monday from 4 to 5:30 p.m. in the City Council Chambers, 1033 Chittenden Ave.

The public outreach will wrap up with a final workshop on Thursday, May 22, 6 to 7:30 p.m., at the Kings County Government Center Multipurpose Room, 1400 W. Lacey Blvd., Hanford.

Officials say the last meeting is where they hope to see large public participation.

In an effort to alleviate problems the Central Valley's booming population will cause, regional leaders are working across city and county lines to address issues such as [air pollution](#), water supply, traffic congestion, affordable housing, resource conservation and protection of environmentally sensitive land.

Once leaders agree on a single blueprint for how they want the region to look like in 40 years, the eight-county region will be expected to grow accordingly.

In Kings County, government leaders are trying to come up with their own 2050 vision, which will be ultimately quilted together with visions from other counties by UC Davis experts to make up a single seamless blueprint for the Valley.

Several different blueprint scenarios are currently being proposed based on a status quo, agricultural and resource protection, Kettleman City and Stratford expansions, compact community development and transportation corridor establishment with expansions of the local highways.

The scheduled workshops would provide more information about each of these proposed scenarios. KCAG officials will be on hand to answer questions and take in any public input. For more information, call the Kings County Association of Governments at 582-3211, ext. 2654 or visit www.countyofkings.com/kcag.

Triple digit temps will arrive Friday

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, May 15, 2008

Today is expected to be sunny and very warm, with highs around 97 degrees.

Lows tonight will be in the 60s. The air quality forecast today will be 132 for ozone, unhealthy for sensitive groups.

The high tomorrow is expected to be 100 degrees. The triple digit temperatures are expected to stick around until Monday.

Planning commissioners mull over voluminous environmental report on the Surland housing project and water park.

Tracy Press, Wednesday, May 14, 2008

Consultants and city engineers minutely detailed tonight for its second public hearing the environmental-impact report for the Ellis project, a 300-acre housing development planned for southwest Tracy.

The hearing was presented at the Tracy Planning Commission, but no action was taken.

The public has another month to expect written responses from city officials to any concerns before the public comment period expires June 14.

The environmental review found that construction of the 2,250 homes planned for The Surland Cos.' housing development and water park would create noise, traffic and air pollution. It could also force Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to replace two natural gas pipelines, unless development wrapped around it.

But the commissioners had little to say about the environmental review except that they needed more time to study it. Thousands of pages of documents outlining both the specific plan and the review for the Ellis project had chairman Pete Mitracos worried that the public and the board had too little time to digest the information presented.

He asked that city engineers repeat the presentation at the June 11 commission meeting, when he said he'd be more prepared.

"We're part-timers here; we're volunteers, and we're not experts," he said. "All we want is more time."

But Tracy residents who commented expressed the opposite sentiment — that getting a water park built, which is contingent on progress of the Ellis project, can't come soon enough.

Engineers assured Mitracos that everyone can provide input until August, when amendments to the developer agreement are up for approval.

Mitracos also asked whether the water park was too expensive for Tracy to maintain after it's built.

Before getting to the environmental review, Surland owner Les Serpa, some private consultants and city staff went over the developer agreement and suggested design of the development.

City Council candidate Larry Gamino said he was disappointed to see the architectural style was so European and unreflective of Tracy's history.

"It's historical amnesia," he told the commission, "that there's this absence of (influence) of native tribes, like the Tuolumne."

Also up for public hearing tonight was a request from the owners of Tracy Gateway, a proposed business park, for a five-year construction delay on a nine-hole golf course and a 200-room hotel. The owners also asked if the contract could be changed so they could have retail space built before 200,000 square feet of office space.

The commission supported the requested amendment for the delay, which would extend the project to 2016, and staff will take it to City Council.

Owner of Hayward building convicted under Clean Air Act

AP State

In the Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, May 15, 2008

The owner of a Hayward commercial building is facing possible prison time after being convicted of violating the Clean Air Act.

Wassim Mohammad Azizi was convicted Wednesday of three felony counts of violating the Clean Air Act for tearing down a two-story building that contained significant amounts of asbestos.

During his five day-trial, jurors determined that during the demolition of the building in late 2002 and early 2003 Azizi failed to comply with the federal law regulating the removal of asbestos.

The maximum penalty for each count of violating the Clean Air Act is five years imprisonment, plus fines and possible restitution.

The 37-year-old Azizi is due to be sentenced on Aug. 27.

No free rides on Spare the Air Thursday

By Denis Cuff

Contra Costa Times, Thursday, May 15, 2008

Today will be the first Spare the Air Day of the smog season, and Bay Area residents are urged to reduce driving, gas mower use and other polluting activities, but the free public transit of previous years will not happen.

Changing course to focus more on reducing global warming gases, the Bay Area's clean air agency has decided to abandon free rides on excessively smoggy days. It instead will set a single free-ride day to be announced weeks in advance.

The free ride this year will be on June 19, providing that the Metropolitan Transportation Commission ratifies the plan in a meeting later this month. Rides will be free all day on buses, and until midday on BART, trains and ferries.

"We want people to spare the air every day, even if it's not an episode of unhealthy ozone (smog), which depends a lot on the meteorological conditions," said Karen Schkolnick, a spokeswoman for the nine-county Bay Air Quality Management District. "We want to focus on pollution emitted year round that contributes to climate change."

The region held two free-fare days in 2007 and six in 2006 in what was the largest program of free transit rides in the United States. The idea was to get more people out of cars to prevent unhealthy smog levels on hot, windless days and to entice more people to try out public transit and consider making it a permanent habit.

Critics contended that paying \$2 million for each free ride day was too expensive for mostly temporary pollution reductions.

And the federal grant money used for free ride days is running out, officials said.

Not driving on a hot day reduces smog-forming gases for a day or two, and not driving to work for weeks or months cuts carbon dioxide and other global warming gases.

With the money saved from cutting back on free ride days, the air district will consider providing free ride coupons for students to take public transit buses to school. More study is needed on that proposal, said Mark Ross, a Martinez city councilman who serves on the Bay Area Air Quality Management District Board.

Public transit adjusts to surge in ridership

By Erik N. Nelson of the Oakland Tribune and Denis Cuff of the Contra Costa Times

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Thursday, May 15, 2008

Traffic congestion and air pollution have long spurred transportation officials and environmental advocates to urge, cajole and beg commuters to switch to public transit. Still, the vast majority of Bay Area commuters wouldn't budge from behind the wheel.

As gasoline prices climb past \$4 a gallon, however, commuters are moving to public transportation in huge numbers, breaking records on BART, commuter trains and transbay bus routes.

Whereas public transportation used to be equal to the task of transporting one in 10 of the Bay Area's commuters, evolving into a major rival of solo driving is proving to be as painful for commuters as it is delightful for public transit advocates.

Parking at many BART and train stations is filling up earlier and earlier. Seating is becoming a luxury on more peak-hour trains and buses, and transit officials are wondering how to increase service at a time when state and local budgets are strapped. The economy is on edge and filling buses' diesel tanks has never been more expensive.

"Just getting 15 miles per gallon from here to Santa Clara was getting to be too much," said Brian Heidl, a mechanical engineer, as he waited for the 6:42 a.m. Altamont Commuter Express train in Livermore on Wednesday.

"I was practically paying \$400 a month just in gas," Heidl said, to keep his 1987 Ford Ranger pickup making the 60-mile trip along some of the area's most congested freeway segments, on Interstates 580 and 680.

Now, he pays about \$225 for his monthly ACE ticket "and I get to sleep the whole way and not have to worry about the traffic."

But veteran ACE riders have noticed that it's getting more difficult to find a seat and bicyclists are lamenting overcrowding on the train's onboard bike rack. On the Gilroy-to-San Francisco Caltrain service, "we have to turn bikes away every day," said railroad spokeswoman Christine Dunn.

Across the nation, skyrocketing gas prices have complicated America's love affair with the car. Motorists drove 0.4 percent fewer miles in 2007 than the previous year, the first time without an increase since at least 1982, the first year mileage was tracked in a report by the Federal Highway Administration. "It's simply becoming too expensive for some people to drive a car on a regular basis," said Virginia Miller, a spokeswoman for the American Public Transit Association. "People are voting with their feet for public transit."

But like a newly elected president, transit systems will be hard-pressed to meet all the needs of their new constituents.

New BART riders, for example, are finding rush-hour trains more packed than ever, leading the agency to experiment with removing seats on some cars to make more room near the doors for standing riders.

Public transit ridership has grown rapidly since gas prices regularly exceeded \$3 per gallon in mid-2005, and growth accelerated this year as prices neared or surpassed \$4 a gallon.

The biggest surge in the number of riders is on rail systems such as BART, which carry long-distance commuters who have the option of driving but now feel an especially sharp pinch at the pump.

Across the nation, commuter rail systems such as ACE, which runs from Stockton to San Jose, saw an average ridership gain of 6.1 percent in 2007, according to the transit association's statistics.

In the Bay Area, where gas prices have been among the highest in the nation, the effect has been dramatic. Riders have flocked to ACE and Capitol Corridor trains, which run from the Sacramento area to San Jose via the East Bay. On both services, ridership rose 13.6 percent in the first quarter of 2008 compared with the same quarter last year.

On bus systems, which often carry many people who have no other means of getting around, ridership nationally climbed about 1 percent last year.

AC Transit, which serves large lower-income, non-driving populations in Oakland, Richmond and other areas stretching south to Fremont, is such a system. Its heavily subsidized local ridership

has stagnated after service cuts and other constraints. But many of its transbay bus routes, which cater to "choice" riders with private vehicles, have seen ridership increases as high as 20 percent in the past year.

Although most of the drivers making the switch are turning to public transit, other modes also appear to be growing. On the Bay Bridge, for instance, carpool traffic grew 5.2 percent in the nine months ending with March, even as overall traffic declined.

Auto traffic in the Bay Area has declined before, most significantly when the dot-com bubble burst, leaving far fewer jobs to which people would commute. That trend was accompanied by a drop in transit use, too.

The Peninsula's popular Gilroy-to-San Francisco Caltrain service saw its ridership tank after hitting its dot-com peak in 2001.

Seven years later, Caltrain finally surpassed that record, hitting 3,993 average daily riders in February.

"We're already seeing some of our express trains during the peak hours at capacity," said Caltrain spokeswoman Christine Dunn. "We've added as many trains as we can add. We have scheduled as close as we can schedule," with eight trains passing through Millbrae during rush hour.

The agency is acquiring eight new cars by the end of the year to add to existing trains, Dunn added, but it will be many years off, with the advent of a closely controlled electric-powered system, that it will be able to run trains more frequently.

One of the more daunting challenges posed by the surge in riders involves getting riders from often sprawling suburban neighborhoods to use public transportation.

The current trend can be painfully evident to commuters who show up at the Pleasant Hill BART Station after 7:45 a.m.

BART regular Gary Alexander once became so exasperated upon finding no parking there that he returned to his Walnut Creek home and called a taxi to drive him back to the station.

"The parking absolutely is getting worse," Alexander said. "You learn to play the parking game. You get here early, or you have to have another plan."

"Parking is a constraint," said BART General Manager Dorothy Dugger, "but we need to look at parking as one part of the challenge in improving access to our stations." Bus, bike and foot traffic must also factor in, she said.

Dugger said BART's ability to move passengers would be taxed if ridership continues to climb 4 percent or more for a decade, which is twice the rate of BART's historical growth rate.

"We have capacity now," she said. "But we're in the same boat as a lot of the older transit systems. We're talking about the need for adequate levels of federal support to reinvest in these systems, as well as to meet the demand for increased capacity."

BART is taking some measures for short-term relief. Train system managers have started a pilot project to remove as many as six seats near the doors of as many as 80 cars. The experiment seeks to determine whether the extra space will move trains more quickly through stations by speeding up the loading and unloading of passengers.

Although experts predict that high fuel prices will persist as worldwide oil demand grows and supply struggles to keep up, commuting experts such as Alan Pisarski caution that the allure of the personal vehicle is still strong.

"There's an argument to be made that gas prices aren't going back down, but I'm not so sure," said Pisarski, author of the "Commuting in America" report series read by transportation officials across the nation. Pisarski noted that past dire predictions about oil supply, during the oil shortages of the 1970s and early 1980s, proved premature.

"When gas prices recede," he said, "people snap back to their previous behavior."

BART operators painfully recall expecting continued robust growth after the late 1990s, only to watch riders dwindle along with dot-com jobs during 2002, 2003 and 2004.

"People don't change their habits overnight simply because the price of gas this week went over \$4 a gallon," said BART spokesman Linton Johnson. "We could have sky-high gas prices, but if there are no jobs or if the freeways are empty, we won't have as many riders."

Some transit operators say they expect to hold on to many new riders, though.

In the Seattle area, rail ridership stayed 10 percent higher after the completion of a major freeway project last year that impeded traffic for weeks.

"Once they tried public transit, they thought it was worth the cost-saving and convenience," said Linda Robson, a spokeswoman for Sound Transit, which runs trains and buses in the Seattle and Tacoma areas.

Bay Area commuters got a similar push to try public transportation last year when a MacArthur Maze freeway ramp collapsed in a fiery gasoline tanker truck accident and construction closed the Bay Bridge during Labor Day weekend.

Ridership broke records on BART during those periods, and it remained high after the blocked structures reopened.

Paying for transit

Public transportation in California is funded through a complex set of programs and formulas. In the Bay Area, it costs more than \$2.2 billion a year (2006-07 fiscal year) to operate two dozen rail, bus and ferry services.

Nearly \$604 million of that comes from fares, and the remainder comes from county sales taxes, property taxes, state sales tax on gasoline, federal transit grants and, showing how complicated the system is, the largest category is one the Metropolitan Transportation Commissions calls "other."

Although most of California's transit services get their biggest chunk of funding from local sales taxes, as do SamTrans and Santa Clara County's Valley Transportation Authority, the Bay Area has some big anomalies. San Francisco's Muni System got more than half of last year's \$580 million budget from city general funds, and the East Bay's AC Transit gets a quarter of its \$300 million operating budget from property taxes.

One of the most unpredictable sources is from the state government. It's either feast or famine for two reasons: One, it's from the sales tax on gasoline, which has ballooned in recent years along with gas prices, and two, that big bundle of revenue is a tempting pot of money for the governor and state legislators to raid for other purposes during tough budget years such as this one. Transportation officials estimate the gas sales tax haul to reach \$2.5 billion for the fiscal year starting July 1, but key state officials are already discussing the possibility of diverting those funds to cover the budget shortfall for nontransit programs.

City Council delays decision on regional shopping center

By Paula King, East County Times

In the Contra Costa Times, Thursday, May 15, 2008

OAKLEY — After hearing a wave of public comments Tuesday night, the Oakley City Council decided to delay its decision on a proposed regional shopping center until its June 11 meeting.

The River Oaks Crossing center has been envisioned as a major employment area and regional commercial hub for Oakley. The 76-acre property now holds heritage vineyards north of Main Street.

Last month, the Oakley Planning Commission approved the retail project but called for tightened security, preservation of some vines and a ban of 24-hour operations. Other recommended changes include enhanced traffic-calming efforts and less parking lot sprawl.

The commission also voted against allowing a 24-hour operation to locate in the center. In February, Wal-Mart withdrew plans for a 24-hour Supercenter as the main anchor tenant of River Oaks.

Oakley resident Mark Gagliardi spoke about how important it was to include the commission's recommendations in the final plans for the center. Three big-box tenants were originally slated for the center, but the commission voted to split those into smaller retail operations to fit market demand.

As project director of California Healthy Communities Network, Phil Tucker said that any big-box operation in River Oaks could harm the city's plan to redevelop its historic downtown.

"This big-box development definitely has an impact," Tucker said. "Any Supercenter use such as a Wal-Mart, Target or Sears all have similar effects on retail."

In response to Tucker's comments, Councilman Brad Nix asked how does the city recapture the sales tax revenue it loses every year to Antioch's Slatten Ranch shopping center and other retail operations along Lone Tree Way.

"This area we felt was critical to our economic development so we had staff work on it," Councilwoman Pat Anderson said.

Some residents urged the council to push forward on this critical commercial development. The city needs this project to bring business and services to its citizenry, according to Oakley resident Roger Mammon.

"I look forward to more businesses coming in," said local business owner and resident Doug Hardcastle. "I thrive on competition. With competition, it makes everyone better."

The biggest opponents of the project were area representatives of the Green Party. They said there are deficiencies in the plan's environmental documents and that it will harm the environment and put Oakley merchants out of business.

Representing the Delta Greens, Oakley resident Eve Diamond said the city should consider a smaller project that would impact air quality, land use, traffic and urban blight less. She added that the project destroy old-growth vineyards and eliminates agricultural land.

"The project will destroy the economic viability of Oakley's downtown, which will not be able to compete with 770,000 square feet of new retail," she said.

In the next few weeks, city staff will review all public comments and questions before the June meeting.

Thursday declared first Spare the Air day

Michael Cabanatuan, Chronicle Staff Writer
San Francisco Chronicle, Thursday, May 15, 2008

San Francisco -- This is the Bay Area's first Spare the Air Day of the 2008 smog season, air quality officials said Wednesday afternoon. And while they're encouraging people to ride public transit, they're not offering free rides.

Coincidentally, today is also the Bay Area's annual Bike to Work Day. And transit officials are hoping drivers will ride their bikes to transit services, particularly BART and ferries.

Forecasters for the weather district called the Spare the Air Day because of anticipated hot weather and a lack of wind - perfect conditions for brewing smog. During Spare the Air Days, Bay Area residents are asked to take transit, minimize driving, turn up the thermostat on their air conditioners and avoid using aerosol sprays or gas-powered lawn mowers.

Free rides on transit on Spare the Air Days - a strategy that's been used in recent years - isn't being offered this year. Lisa Fasano, a spokeswoman for the air district, said air quality and transit officials decided instead to offer a single, planned free-transit day this summer - on June 19.

The region could afford only a single free-ride day this year, and decided that offering a free ride day that could be promoted in advance might entice more drivers to try transit than the free Spare the Air rides, which were announced with short notice.

"Since public transit ridership is already up, we wanted to find a new way to get drivers to try transit," she said. "This way people can plan their transit use and make appropriate arrangements."

Asbestos conviction of building owner

Henry K. Lee

San Francisco Chronicle, Thursday, May 15, 2008

A Tracy man was convicted by a federal jury Wednesday of illegally demolishing a Hayward building filled with asbestos.

Wassim Mohammad Azizi, 37, was found guilty of three counts of violating the Clean Air Act in connection with the razing of a vacant, two-story wooden building he owned at 27794 Mission Blvd. in Hayward.

After a five-day trial in U.S. District Court in San Francisco, a federal jury found that Azizi failed to notify the Environmental Protection Agency and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District that the demolition in late 2002 and early 2003 would result in the release of asbestos.

The jury also concluded that Azizi failed to keep wet and contain the regulated asbestos-containing material in leak-tight containers.

Azizi is scheduled to be sentenced Aug. 27.

Researchers warn of nitrogen hazard to environment

Modesto Bee, Thursday, May 15, 2008

WASHINGTON — While carbon dioxide has been getting lots of publicity in climate change, reactive forms of nitrogen are also building up in the environment, scientists warn.

"The public does not yet know much about nitrogen, but in many ways it is as big an issue as carbon, and due to the interactions of nitrogen and carbon, makes the challenge of providing food and energy to the world's peoples without harming the global environment a tremendous challenge," University of Virginia environmental sciences professor James Galloway said in a statement.

"We are accumulating reactive nitrogen in the environment at alarming rates, and this may prove to be as serious as putting carbon dioxide in the atmosphere," said Galloway, author of a paper and co-author of a second on the topic in Friday's issue of the journal Science.

While nitrogen alone is inert and harmless, reactive nitrogen compounds - such as ammonia - have been released by its use in nitrogen-based fertilizers and the large-scale burning of fossil fuels.

Various forms of nitrogen contribute to greenhouse warming, smog, haze, acid rain dead zones with little or no life along the coasts, and depletion of the ozone layer in the stratosphere, the researchers concluded.

The researchers propose ways to reduce nitrogen use, ranging from encouraging its uptake by plants to recovering and reusing nitrogen from manure and sewage and decreasing nitrogen emissions from fossil fuel combustion.

Effort to cut diesel pollution

Kelly Zito

San Francisco Chronicle, Thursday, May 15, 2008

PROPOSAL: The governor's revised proposal is a one-time transaction that would take \$48.7 million from the Air Quality Improvement Fund to help refit heavy equipment and vehicles that pollute heavily.

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU: The refitting is designed to reduce air pollution from diesel trucks and buses, which air quality experts say produce some of the highest levels of cancer-causing soot in California. In particular, small businesses that have diesel trucks, buses or other heavy mobile equipment would get financial help in replacing or updating their vehicles to pollute less in advance of state regulations curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

REACTION: "The idea is to provide grants, loans and loan guarantees ... to help retrofit ahead of regulatory deadlines," said Bonnie Holms-Ven, senior policy director of the American Lung Association's California chapter. "We think it's an important investment in state funds to reduce this toxic threat."

Pedaling A Healthy Initiative: Democratic Convention Host Committee to Bring Humana's Freewheelin Bike Sharing Effort to Denver Mile High City Teams Up With Humana and Bikes Belong to Bring 1000 bikes to Denver to Support Personal and Environmental Health

Fresno Bee, Thursday, May 15, 2008

Amid the buzz of national Bike to Work Week, the Denver 2008 Convention Host Committee, Humana Inc. (NYSE: HUM) and Bikes Belong took steps with - or better yet, pedaled - a new initiative today to encourage bike use as an alternative mode of transportation during the Democratic National Convention, placing the city of Denver on the cusp of an emerging global municipal trend promising to improve the health of residents and the environment.

Denver Host Committee President Elbra Wedgeworth, along with Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper and Colorado Governor Bill Ritter, Jr., unveiled plans for a new city-wide bike-sharing program called Freewheelin, part of Denver's ongoing efforts to support healthy living and environmental sustainability during and after the Democratic National Convention.

The Freewheelin program was developed by Humana in partnership with bike industry leaders. As part of the multi-pronged initiative, Humana and the not-for-profit Bikes Belong will bring nearly 1,000 bikes to Denver during the Democratic National Convention in August. The bikes can be used free of charge by anyone looking for an alternative to automobiles while the convention is in town.

"With 300 days of sunshine a year, bicycling remains one of the most viable alternatives to driving in Denver, helping to reduce traffic congestion and air pollution," said Mayor Hickenlooper.

"Denver is one of the healthiest and most active cities in America, so we're excited to pioneer a bike-sharing model that supports a physically and environmentally healthy community. While bicycles are part of our strategy to host the greenest national political convention ever, our commitment to being a bike-friendly city is long-term."

Denver joins a small group of progressive cities establishing bike-sharing programs in the United States. Seventy of those 1,000 bikes and the checkout kiosks will remain after the convention and be donated to the city by Humana, as part of an ongoing program to support carbon emission reduction and healthy active lifestyles. The program will also establish a lasting legacy and a start to a permanent bike sharing system in Denver.

The legacy program will feature Freewheelin bike racks set up at various points around the city, each housing a collection of the program's proprietary bikes, which are equipped with trip computers. A solar powered kiosk through which participants can "check out" a bike to use for things such as riding to work or doing errands, or simply taking a leisurely spin will accompany each bike rack.

Once users are finished, they simply return the bike to any Freewheelin rack in the city. Participants can register for the program on the Freewheelin website, and use the site to automatically track things like their mileage, their personal carbon offset and other health information. Riders simply use a credit card or a Freewheelin key fob to check the bike out at no charge during the convention.

"Denver is renowned for its commitment to healthy living, so it makes perfect sense that Freewheelin will have a home here," said Dan Oftedahl, Denver-based market president for Humana. "Through bike sharing, Denver residents will not only have the opportunity to contribute toward a cleaner environment while at the same time improving their health but they also will have fun doing it along the way."

Humana piloted the Freewheelin program in Louisville, Ky., in 2008 by installing Freewheelin bikes and racks for use by employees free of charge. More than 2,500 employees registered for the program. Based on the success of the pilot, Humana is expanding the program to other cities, as well as college and corporate campuses across the country. Bike sharing is a popular alternative used in various European cities including Paris and Amsterdam to encourage "green" and congestion-free transportation.

"This is an exceptional opportunity to show how well bicycling works for short trips in big cities," said Tim Blumenthal, Executive Director of Bikes Belong. "Considering that 41 percent of all trips in automobiles are two miles or less, bikes are an ideal alternative."

About Humana

Humana Inc., headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, is one of the nation's largest publicly traded health and supplemental benefits companies, with approximately 11.4 million medical members. Humana is a full-service benefits solutions company, offering a wide array of health and supplementary benefit plans for employer groups, government programs and individuals.

Over its 47-year history, Humana has consistently seized opportunities to meet changing customer needs. Today, the company is a leader in consumer engagement, providing guidance that leads to lower costs and a better health plan experience throughout its diversified customer portfolio.

More information regarding Humana is available to investors via the Investor Relations page of the company's web site at <http://www.humana.com>, including copies of:

- Annual reports to stockholders
- Securities and Exchange Commission filings
- Most recent investor conference presentations
- Quarterly earnings news releases
- Replays of most recent earnings release conference calls
- Calendar of events (includes upcoming earnings conference call dates and times, as well as planned interaction with research analysts and institutional investors)
- Corporate Governance Information

About Bikes Belong

Bikes Belong is the U.S. bicycling organization dedicated to putting more people on bicycles more often. Bikes Belong Coalition works to maximize federal bike funding, awards grants to support innovative bike projects, promotes bicycling and its benefits, and sponsors key national initiatives such as the National Bike Summit and Bicycle Friendly Communities. The affiliated Bikes Belong Foundation focuses on improving bicycle safety and enhancing children's bike programs.

About Denver 2008 Convention Host Committee

The Denver 2008 Convention Host Committee has four contractual partners in its work. Those partners are the Democratic National Convention Committee, the City and County of Denver, Kroenke Sports and its own Executive Committee.

For Humana: Anna Hobbs-Little, 214-336-1821 (cell) ahobbslittle@humana.com or For the Democratic Convention Host Committee Chris Lopez, 303-534-6200

The Promise of Green Paint

By Sarah Kershaw

The NY Times, Thursday, May 15, 2008

WHEN it comes to building, renovating and maintaining a home, paint is a little like milk: it's a staple, a basic ingredient. And much like milk, a product that helped make the organic food movement a mass-market phenomenon, paint is leading the expansion of the green building movement, as stricter regulations, pressure from environmental groups and increasing consumer demand for eco-friendly products force manufacturers to produce paints with fewer dangerous and smog-producing compounds.

In the last few years, the marketplace for paint has undergone a dizzying revolution, with paint companies furiously researching technologies that will help them compete with new green lines in this changed universe. A number of start-ups, too, have introduced paint brands (several made with milk) that they claim are not only safer for humans and the earth than conventional paint, but more durable and better performing than the paints billed as eco-friendly that came on the market in the early 1990s and failed to take hold.

Not everyone is happy about the shift. Many designers, painters and consumers who applaud environmental responsibility are nevertheless worried about the growing restrictions on oil-based paints (which contain high levels of harmful volatile organic compounds), and even on less hazardous water-based latex ones.

They argue that there is no way, at least with the products currently available, to replicate the sheen, consistency or lasting power of an oil-based paint, particularly for use on cabinetry, trim, bookshelves and other specialty jobs. And they complain that painting a wall or ceiling can require several more applications of the newer paints made to be low in volatile organic compounds, or V.O.C.'s, than of old-fashioned latex blends.

Even then, the look is not the same, and flaws like rough brushstrokes are more visible. Maura Sperry, who paints apartments in New York, said she has begun to advise clients to expect to spend more time and money on jobs using low-V.O.C. paints, given that she has to use five coats to achieve the same coverage she gets with two coats of traditional latex paint.

"I just wish they could get the product to really perform as well as the other products," she said of the manufacturers.

Jackie Greenberg, an interior designer in Manhattan, said she had designed an apartment for clients who requested low-V.O.C. paint, then demanded a new paint job within a year because of signs of wear and tear; J. J. Snyder, a Brooklyn painter who works on high-end residential jobs, said he has heard from clients about problems that start even earlier.

"They will tell you that the new latex is just as hard-wearing," Mr. Snyder said. "But it's not as hard-wearing. You put this latex on a cabinet, and six months later your clients are complaining."

Eve Ashcraft, an architectural color consultant in Manhattan, agreed. "The products behave differently. If you bring the old ideas in, the paint's going to be disappointing."

Still, Ms. Ashcraft and other designers and painters interviewed said they supported the efforts to protect the environment, and that the demand from their clients for safer, more environmentally responsible paints was getting stronger. Adrienne LaBelle, another Manhattan interior designer, said she was seeing it grow, especially among clients with young children. "Everybody's really on this right now," she added.

The problem is one of expectations, Ms. Ashcraft said: "If you want health-food Doritos, I bet you they will not taste the same. It's a trade-off."

THE environmental issues are complex, the regulations vary wildly across the country, and many questions remain about the performance of paints known as low- or no-V.O.C. They contain small or only trace amounts of volatile organic compounds, solvent additives that manufacturers have long regarded as crucial to paint quality. But they also release harmful vapors and greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and can cause headaches and dizziness, can potentially exacerbate asthma and other health conditions, and can even cause kidney and liver damage if exposure is extremely high, according to public health experts.

Oil-based paints, which contain the highest levels of V.O.C.'s, have been tightly restricted in recent years in California, New York and a growing number of other East Coast states. They are still readily available in other parts of the country, but this summer the United States Environmental Protection Agency is expected to propose a stricter regulation that would bring the national standards in line with those East Coast states. If the proposal is adopted, sales of oil-based paints would be limited across the country.

The rules have also required manufacturers to bring down V.O.C. levels in their latex paints, which are significantly lower in V.O.C.'s than oil-based ones.

Southern California has the toughest rules, and industry experts said they expected the federal rule to eventually reflect those standards. Anticipating a world of low- and very low-V.O.C. paint, a growing number of manufacturers have developed new paints to comply with the strictest standards, including Sherwin-Williams, the Home Depot and Benjamin Moore, which introduced its premium low-V.O.C. Aura line last year.

"We didn't want to have to go back and reformulate it every time a state changes its rules," said Carl Minchew, Benjamin Moore's director of product technology. "Our view is that what starts in California eventually finds its way across the country."

Benjamin Moore, which is still selling oil-based paints outside of California and the East Coast states that restrict them, has marketed its Aura line as a high-performing paint — requiring only one coat — that also happens to be safe for the environment. It is considerably more expensive than the company's higher-V.O.C. Regal line: \$54.95 on average per gallon, compared to \$35 to \$42, according to company officials.

Mr. Minchew said the higher cost stems from the investment in the research and development that made the Aura line possible, and that he expects the price to come down over time.

Other, smaller manufacturers, like Yolo Colorhouse in Portland, Ore., and Mythic Paint, a Mississippi-based company in business since December, sell only low- or zero-V.O.C. paints. They say they can match any color — any one of Benjamin Moore's 3,300, for example — and also offer their own palettes.

"Consumers are becoming more educated," said Virginia Young, a founder of Yolo Colorhouse, a brand that sells for \$39.95 a gallon and that Ms. LaBelle, the Manhattan interior designer, said she had used and was generally pleased with. "Three years ago, when we launched, people didn't know what V.O.C.'s were. On the West Coast, at least, that's in their vocabulary now."

IN March, Consumer Reports released an assessment of 57 interior paints currently on the market, including low-V.O.C. ones, that evaluated their "hiding performance, surface smoothness, and resistance to staining and scrubbing, their gloss change, sticking, mildew and fading." The testers gave "mixed marks" to the low-V.O.C. paints, although they said the products had improved significantly in terms of durability and sheen since they first came on the market.

Benjamin Moore's Aura was ranked third among 21 paints in the low-luster category, which included conventional latex and oil-based paints. True Value EasyCare and Glidden Evermore, both low-V.O.C. lines, came in sixth and seventh, respectively, on the list. But several other low-V.O.C. brands, including Harmony, the Sherwin-Williams zero-V.O.C. line, did not hold up to the performance tests.

For consumers who have decided to use only low- or no-V.O.C. paints, Green Seal, a nonprofit environmental organization that certifies products as eco-friendly, also conducts performance tests that evaluate coverage and how the paint holds up. The group's Web site, greenseal.org, lists 21 brands that have passed its environmental safety and performance tests.

For die-hard fans of oil-based paint, meanwhile, there are still ways to get hold of it, even in the East Coast states that limit its sales. There are exceptions in the regulations allowing the paint to be sold in quarts rather than gallons, and in larger quantities for industrial paint jobs — a loophole that some designers said they had taken advantage of. European lines, like Farrow & Ball, which is sold over the Internet, also have extensive oil-based paint lines, and several designers and painters said that was another way to keep oil in their repertory.

Still, some said they suspect it's only a matter of time before their repertories will have to be reinvented.

"I think it'll be a challenge to figure out something else," said Ms. Greenberg, the Manhattan decorator. "But there have been so many advances just in the last year," she added. "They will have to come up with more in terms of the finishes, but we all have to be more responsible about it."

Mr. Snyder, the Brooklyn painter, was similarly philosophical, if a little less optimistic.

"Every year we're faced with a new set of obstacles to get the same finish," he said, but eventually, "everybody will adapt. People's expectations will change."

"We'll all have our hands tied," he continued. "Hopefully I'll be retired by then."

Making Wet Paint Less Hazardous

VOLATILE organic compounds, or V.O.C.'s, are emitted as gases by products like paint, lacquer, cleaning supplies and pesticides. Exposure to V.O.C.'s in high concentrations can cause short- and long-term health problems, the Environmental Protection Agency says. The agency recommends ventilating spaces that are being painted and buying paint in limited quantities, since even closed containers can emit gases.

Over the past decade, various state and federal regulations have been enacted to reduce V.O.C. levels in paint and other household products. The federal government limits V.O.C.'s in paint to 250 grams per liter for flat finishes and 380 grams per liter for other finishes. Information on V.O.C. content can be found on paint can labels.

The Ozone Transport Commission, an advisory group created under the Clean Air Act of 1990, has established recommendations limiting V.O.C. content further — to 100 grams per liter for flat paint and 150 for other finishes — that New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia and the District of Columbia have either adopted or are in the process of adopting. This summer the E.P.A. is expected to propose stricter federal standards modeled on these recommendations, agency officials said. The strictest rules in the country are in Southern California, where the South Coast Air Quality Management District, a regional regulatory body that oversees Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, as well as parts of Los Angeles — an area with a population of more than 15 million people — requires that all paint sold contain less than 50 grams of V.O.C.'s per liter. Many of the new paints on the market, including Benjamin Moore's Aura, Home Depot's Freshaire Choice and Sherwin-Williams's Harmony, meet that standard. There are also a number of start-up companies, like Yolo Colorhouse and AFM Safecoat, that produce only low- or "zero" V.O.C. paint.

When paint is mixed with color, the V.O.C. content can increase, because colorants typically contain V.O.C.'s; they do not count toward the limits.

Avis Reduces Printed Paper Use By 100 Tons Per Year

Reducing in-car clutter responds to customer information preferences and advances environmental efforts

Avis Rent A Car System, LLC

Fresno Bee, Thursday, May 15, 2008

Avis Rent A Car announced that it will discontinue the printing and distribution of scores of customer brochures and other collateral marketing materials. The effort is expected to reduce

paper consumption by 100 tons per year, preserving about 1,500 trees annually, and reducing Avis' costs.

"Avis has always made it a priority to deliver information about our programs and services to our customers in the format that they prefer. In today's wired world, our customers have told us that they want to obtain this information electronically, via Avis.com," said Becky Alseth, senior vice president of marketing for Avis Budget Group, parent of Avis. "This presented us with the opportunity to reduce our environmental footprint, which is also very important to Avis customers."

Avis.com offers comprehensive information about all aspects of renting from Avis, including:

- Deals: Specials, promotions and partner offers;
- Renter's Guide: Maps and weather, vehicle descriptions, policies & procedures and Avis locations;
- Programs: Avis Preferred, My Avis, customer preference profiles and business programs;
- Customer Service; and
- Company Information.

"In addition to providing all this information in an easy-to-find way, Avis.com also features a very robust search tool that enables customers to simply write in their question, hit enter, and be taken directly to the information they seek," said Alseth. "It's all part of how 'We Try Harder' both to serve our customers, and to be a responsible steward of the environment."

Avis and the Environment

Avis has implemented several initiatives to protect the environment in addition to reducing its use of printed materials. [Avis offers gas/electric hybrid vehicles in subcompact \(Toyota Prius\), full size \(Nissan Altima\) and small SUV \(Ford Escape\) car classes, as well as a full range of fuel-efficient standard-engine vehicles.](#) Approximately half of the Avis fleet is rated at 28 miles per gallon or better (highway), while approximately one fourth is rated at 32 miles per gallon (highway) or better. Sixty-three percent of [Avis vehicles are U.S. EPA Smartway\(R\) Certified; Smartway Certification, which is based on EPA analyses of vehicle fuel efficiency and tailpipe emissions, is designed to help consumers identify the cleanest, most fuel efficient vehicles available.](#)

In addition to offering vehicles that enable renters to minimize the environmental impact from their rental car use, Avis also has begun the process of creating a formal Environmental Management System (EMS) in accordance with ISO 14001 international standards. This will result in a comprehensive plan to reduce environmental impacts including water conservation, energy use, noise emission, use of natural resources, landfill contribution and other areas in which Avis operations interact with the environment.

"At Avis, we're committed not only to offering vehicles that limit the environmental impact from greenhouse gas emissions, but also to exploring opportunities throughout our operations to help protect the environment," said Alseth.

About Avis

Avis Rent A Car System, LLC and its subsidiaries operate one of the world's leading car rental brands, providing business and leisure customers with a wide range of services at more than 2,100 locations in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Latin American / Caribbean region. Avis is one of the world's top brands for customer loyalty, ranking as the number-one car rental company in the 2007 Brand Keys(R) Customer Loyalty Index. The company is a wholly owned subsidiary of Avis Budget Group, Inc. (NYSE: CAR). For more information, visit www.avis.com.

Please Pay Before Boarding the Polka-Dot Psychedelic Buses

By Jennifer Mascia

NY Times, Wednesday, May 14, 2008

No, there are no illegal drugs being handed out as passengers begin their morning commutes: For the past few weeks, those seats on the M23 crosstown bus really have been decorated with light and dark blue bubbles.

The new upholstery is probably the most conspicuous feature of Select Bus Service, an experimental project by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, with the support of the city and state Departments of Transportation, to improve service on congested routes.

The project — the result of several years of study — draws on several elements of Bus Rapid Transit, a system of bus operating practices used in cities around the world. The system's main elements include bus stops where passengers pay the fare before boarding; fewer stops and greater distances between stops; dedicated bus lanes with a distinctive color and lettering; direct routes with frequent service that supplements, but does not replace, regular local bus service; and electronic signals that give the buses priority (a few extra seconds) if a traffic signal is about to switch, say, to yellow from green.

If the project is successful and put into place citywide, it could prove to be a great relief for customers who have long complained about the snail-like pace of city buses, especially the crosstown buses in Manhattan. It could also mark one of the starkest changes for bus riders, who for more than a century have been accustomed to dropping their change — or now, dipping a MetroCard — into the fare box upon boarding. Under the new system, customers will pay before boarding, collecting a proof of purchase from a fare dispenser — similar to a MetroCard vending machine or Muni-Meter parking ticket machine — in the bus shelter.

“The goal is to speed up dwell time through prepayment of fares,” said Paul J. Fleuranges, a spokesman for New York City Transit, the arm of the transportation authority that runs the city's subways and buses. Mr. Fleuranges said the project would also include electronic signs, similar to those already used in San Francisco and other cities, to inform passengers when the next bus will arrive.

New York City Transit is not acquiring new buses for the project, but rather retrofitting existing buses, in particular, the so-called articulated buses — the 60-foot buses that are made up of two segments joined by the accordionlike pivot.

The upholstery on the seats is the first stage of a redesign that will visually distinguish buses in the project from regular city buses.

The bluish polka-dot design is actually a pattern known as Pearl, and is “made from 100 percent recycled material, manufactured by La France Industries,” Mr. Fleuranges said in an e-mail message. The design extends beyond the seat cushions and also covers the rear interior panel of the bus and the interior sides of the buses, below the windows. The exterior of the buses, meanwhile, will feature a light blue nautical design.

“There will be more than 30 buses with this interior, as well as a distinct exterior design that will operate on the first such route, the Select Bus Service Bx12, in the Bronx,” Mr. Fleuranges said. “It takes time to outfit the buses with the new design, so they are being done over time in preparation for the June roll-out. But as they are completed, we are returning them to normal passenger service.” (That might explain why one of the redesigned buses was running on the M23 line, which is not slated to be part of the Select Bus Service program.)

So for now, the odd-looking buses are just that: odd-looking. But starting in the summer, the Select Bus Service program will be unveiled along these routes:

Fordham Road and Pelham Parkway in the Bronx (Bx12 bus route)

First and Second Avenues in Manhattan (M15 bus route)

34th Street in Manhattan (M34 and M16 bus routes)

Fifth and Madison Avenues (M1, M2, M3, M4, M5 and Q32 bus routes)

Hylan Boulevard on Staten Island (S79 bus route)

Nostrand Avenue in Brooklyn (B44 bus route).

Was the design for these buses inspired, perhaps, by the psychedelic buses of the 1960s, like the Furthur bus, pictured below, that Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters drove around? Officials appeared to be ambivalent about the comparison.

Seth Solomonow, a spokesman for the city's Department of Transportation, said the design was selected after a careful process. "The pattern we selected wasn't a from-scratch design — it was one of hundreds of samples we looked at with M.T.A. New York City Transit," he said in an e-mail message. "We liked it because it was lively and distinct, reflecting the movement and uniqueness of the service."

Pollution Particles Impair Blood Vessel Function

Washington Post Wednesday, May 14, 2008

(HealthDay News) -- Just a few hours of exposure to particulate matter air pollution can increase blood pressure and harm blood vessel function within 24 hours, a new study finds.

The findings may explain why air pollution can trigger a range of cardiovascular events such as heart attack, heart failure and stroke, the researchers said.

Particulate matter (PM) is a component of air pollution emitted from vehicles, power plants, and factories. It's believed that PM is the 13th leading cause of death worldwide, but the link between PM and death hasn't been well understood.

"Not everyone is equally at risk to the effects of poor air quality," researcher Robert Brook, an assistant professor of medicine, division of cardiovascular medicine, University of Michigan, said in a prepared statement.

"Yet, as traffic worsens and millions of vulnerable people are exposed to PM, it is incumbent upon us to understand how and why people are affected so that we can take steps to limit our personal exposure -- and consider making broader changes to the public agenda to control air pollution," Brook said.

In the study, researchers looked at adults living in Toronto and Ann Arbor, Mich.

In Toronto, 30 adults, aged 18 to 50, were exposed for two hours to concentrated ambient PM (CAPS alone), CAPS and ozone, ozone alone, or filtered air. Exposure to air pollution that contains PM (CAP or CAP and ozone) resulted in an average diastolic blood pressure increase of 3.6 mm/Hg. Blood vessel function was impaired 24 hours after (but not immediately after) all exposures to all exposures containing PM, but not ozone alone.

In Ann Arbor, 50 adults were pre-treated with either the antioxidant vitamin C -- which blocks the vasoconstrictor hormone endothelin (bosentan) -- or placebo. Diastolic blood pressure increased between 2.5 and 4.0 mm/Hg during all exposures. However, blood pressure function was not impaired at any time after all exposures, and blood pressure returned to normal within 10 minutes after exposure.

The fact that vitamin C didn't block the blood pressure response suggests that it's likely caused by a sudden increase in sympathetic nervous system activity.

The findings confirm that PM, not ozone, is responsible for the rapid increase in diastolic blood pressure and that this occurs only during actual inhalation of PM. The research also confirms that PM impairs blood vessel function one day after exposure. However, this blood vessel function response occurred only in Toronto, which suggests that the composition of PM or its source may play a role in determining that kind of response, the researchers said.

The study was expected to be presented Wednesday at the American Society of Hypertension annual meeting, in New Orleans.

"These findings are a springboard for further study that will specifically determine how the sympathetic nervous system responds and to what types of particles in air pollution," Brook said. "But this glimpse helps us determine the triggers behind a range of CV events -- some deadly. Learning how this dangerous cascade starts can help the medical and public health community make advances toward limiting their impact in the future."

[Merced Sun-Star Editorial, Thursday, May 15, 2008:](#)

Our View: Let's embrace innovation

Attend meeting tonight to explore ways Merced can create jobs and improve environment.

There's no time limit on innovation. We're reaping the benefits of decades' worth of technological advancement and it's almost scary to think what forms progress could take in the years ahead. It's reasonable to assume we will continue to see quantum leaps in medical, scientific and commercial areas. Merced should jump on this bandwagon.

A forum is planned tonight in Merced to explore ways in which this community can create more jobs and advance environmental causes at the same time. Why not? With the demise of Castle Air Force Base and the Farmer's Insurance regional office, stagnant agriculture, along with other economic maladies of late, Merced needs to reinvent itself and this voyage of discovery has a long ways to go.

We think it would be a splendid idea for folks interested in this topic to attend the 7 p.m. meeting today at Merced Theatre, 301 W. Main St. But whether you go to this meeting or not, let's keep the ball rolling on this issue.

Why couldn't Merced become known years from now for its environmentally centered enterprises, which not only prosper but also provide lasting benefit for mankind? Other communities have adopted this approach with success. There is commercial space available in several locations for new businesses. Many research firms can benefit from state and federal grants for study of specific subjects.

For years it's been mentioned that the growth of UC Merced will foster research companies that study issues the university is concurrently exploring. We still think is a promising aspect which relates to the topic at hand: erasing the area's double-digit unemployment by providing good-paying, stable positions.

Wind and solar power, other fuel or energy sources, medical and environmental research are just a few of the avenues begging to be explored. Merced and the rest of the San Joaquin Valley have notoriously poor air quality; couldn't some forward-thinking entrepreneurs address this issue right in our hometown?

This meeting and the thinking behind it represent a positive effort to make things better, rather than only protest other development plans. It should be encouraged and we fervently hope something comes of this effort.

[Fresno Bee Smog Log, Wed., May 13, 2008:](#)

Clovis is hot spot so far

The San Joaquin Valley's clean-air spring is just about over. Figures show state ozone violations have occurred on 10 of the last 12 days.

And Arvin, usually the smog kingpin in the Valley, is not the worst place in the region. Clovis has claimed that spot for now.

Ozone forms best in heat and sunshine. With 90-degree heat on the way this week, there may be more violations on the way.

The Valley already leads California in state violations. The California Air Resources Board revised its data and discovered Clovis in April had two violations of the federal standard, which is more lenient than the state standard.

Clovis also has 20 violations of the state standard -- most in the state. Arvin and Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks both have 13.

For total violations over the past five years, Arvin is the worst place in the country. Will Clovis continue to lead the Valley and the state in ozone violations? Only time will tell.

[San Diego Union-Tribune Blog, Thursday, May 15, 2008:](#)

Lawn mower exchange Saturday

The county will hold its ninth annual lawn-mower exchange Saturday to again promote a way to cut air pollution.

Participants must bring a functional, gas-powered mower that has been emptied of gas and oil. They also must have a photo I.D. and proof of residency in the county, such as a utility bill.

In exchange, they can buy a cordless, battery-powered mower for \$150. The non-discounted price is about \$400.

Some gasoline mowers emit 40 times more pollution per hour than a late-model car, while the mowers offered by the county's air-pollution control board emit no pollutants.

County officials will offer 417 cordless mowers, which they bought with money from penalties paid by violators of air-quality laws. The mowers will be available on a first-come, first-served basis, with each participant limited to one machine.

The event will start at 8 a.m., although residents commonly show up earlier. It will take place in the north parking lot of the County Administration Center, 1600 Pacific Highway, San Diego.

--Mike Lee

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wed., May 14, 2008:](#)

City's left-turn signals 'add to our problems'

If this city is so concerned about the smog problem, why does it keep installing left-turn lights that only add to our problems?

If only we had the capability of fixing these left-turn signals to work during certain times of the day, such as at the schools, and then have them turn to red-flashing or yellow left-turn signals while the through traffic has the green.

I can name at least four different signals where this would greatly help. Specifically, Blackstone and Princeton avenues, Dakota Avenue and Fresno Street, Gettysburg Avenue and Fresno, and Gettysburg and First Street. There are other towns in California that use either flashing left-turn or yellow left-turn signals during green through-traffic lights. Is there some reason Fresno doesn't?

Alice Hendricks, Fresno

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, May 15, 2008:](#)

Not weird to be green

Editor: Regarding the recent article, "Stanislaus, Merced counties green efforts lag," I'm pleased to inform you that the efforts of home builders in this regard do not. The Building Industry Association has formed a green building task force comprised of area home builders, environmental specialists, utility providers and others.

The task force will identify best practices in green building. This means using sustainable building products, energy efficiency, water conservation and improving indoor air quality. The California Building Industry Association's California Green Builder Program has already been adopted throughout California. Several of our members and Habitat for Humanity have already introduced green home features.

Still, new homes represent only 1 percent of housing. Homes in California constructed over the last decade are more efficient than homes in any other state. Older homes are exponentially less efficient on a scale that corresponds to the age of construction. Meaningful achievements in energy conservation and carbon reduction will only be achieved by retrofitting existing homes.

Local jurisdictions support this effort. Our goal is to introduce a quantifiable program that helps municipalities and utility companies to meet requirements for carbon reduction and helps the environment. You don't have to be weird to be green.

Steve Madison

Executive Vice President, Merced Building Industry Association/Building Industry Association of Central California, Modesto

[The Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Thursday, May 15, 2008:](#)

Thank you, Bike Bakersfield

Recently, I decided to ride my bike to work. On my way back from work, I met Bob Smith, a longtime bicycle rider involved with Bike Bakersfield, a local organization that promotes riding to work. He mentioned that if I wanted to continue riding to work, I should get myself a road bike (the kind with the skinny tires).

The next day, Bob visited me at work to tell me that they had some donated bikes at Bike Bakersfield and if I wanted to, I could have a road bike.

The following day, I went to check out the bikes Bob had mentioned. I chose a nice road bike they had and took it home. I rode the road bike the next Monday. What a difference!

Thanks to Bob and Bike Bakersfield, I ride my bike to work almost every day. I work for an architecture firm that encourages sustainable practices at work. My boss was very excited to hear that I was riding to work. Our office used to be a residence and it had a shower, which was turned into storage, but now we are planning to reopen it. We are also installing a bicycle rack outside the office.

All thanks in great part to Bob and Bike Bakersfield. Thank you, Bob, and thank you, Bike Bakersfield. What a great organization!

Miguel Castellanos, Bakersfield