

## **South side's vision of future up for review**

### **Plan will not come without problems in traffic, noise and loss of ag land.**

By Leslie Albrecht

Merced Sun-Star, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008

The future of Merced's struggling south side will be on the City Council's agenda Thursday night, with the council scheduled to review a long-range vision for development there.

The council will vote on whether to approve the South Merced Community Plan, a 66-page document that will serve as the blueprint for future growth on the city's south side, which some call Merced's most neglected neighborhood.

A community bike path, a jumbo-sized park and industrial and business areas that could house hundreds of jobs are among the features the plan outlines for the south side.

But that growth will come with a price.

The environmental impact report on the South Merced Community Plan says putting the plan in motion will lessen air quality, worsen traffic, add to noise and eat up ag land.

The council will also vote on whether the plan's potential social and economic benefits outweigh the environmental problems it will create.

Those potential benefits include some of the services that South Merced residents have been seeking for decades, such as retail and commercial hubs. The plan calls for setting aside land about a half-mile east of Tyler and Mission for development as an urban village, a combination of shopping, office, retail space and housing, said the city's principal planner, Bill King. A 40-acre site near Henry Street and Mission Avenue would be slated for a regional commercial shopping center where big-box retailers could set up shop.

Other highlights of the plan include a 40-acre park at the corner of Tyler Road and Mission Avenue and a bike and pedestrian path running from Highway 99 to R Street.

King noted that the plan doesn't guarantee that development will occur -- it simply outlines where development should go if it does happen.

But if the council approves the South Merced Community Plan on Thursday night, it will pave the way for development nearby. Four developers want to annex land -- move it from county to city jurisdiction -- on the south side, but the city won't move forward on those plans until the South

### **Merced Community Plan is approved.**

Merced City Council

WHEN: 7 p.m. Thursday

WHERE: Second floor of City Hall at 678 W. 18th St.

WHAT: See the South Merced Community Plan and its environmental impact report.

ONLINE: Log on to the Documents and Handouts section of the Planning Division page at [cityofmerced.org](http://cityofmerced.org)

## **Discounts offered to replace old wood stoves**

By Jane Kay, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008

San Francisco -- Bay Area residents who want to replace old fireplaces and wood-burning stoves with cleaner-burning models can get discounts on the new equipment at stores in the region, air quality regulators said Tuesday.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District had set aside \$100,000 for the "change-out" program, which will provide \$300 to \$600 in discounts on new gas, pellet or EPA-certified woodstoves, fireplace inserts and gas logs.

But in the hours after the program was announced, the available funds dropped to \$60,800. Many people had been waiting for the program to start, and retailers may have called interested customers, **air** district spokeswoman Karen Schkolnick said.

Consumers can receive the discounts - first-come, first-served - until March 31 at several retailers and distributors (see link to list below).

The air district, which is preparing regulations to limit wood burning on days with high smoke, haze and airborne dust levels, hopes the discounts will be an incentive for residents to stop dirty burning in open hearths and in old woodstoves.

Wood smoke is the major source of particulate air pollution during the winter. Long-term exposure can reduce lung function and cause bronchitis and premature death.

Short-term episodes aggravate lung disease, causing asthma attacks and susceptibility to infection, medical experts say.

The Bay Area is subject to penalties by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under the federal Clean Air Act if it doesn't reduce the fine particles in the air.

Old free-standing stoves and fireplace inserts that qualify for the replacement program must have been manufactured before 1992, the year that federal regulations began requiring cleaner-burning equipment. Older stoves can emit 70 percent more smoke than newer appliances, officials say.

"You have to show that you are changing out an old dirty wood-burning stove or fireplace and replacing it with either an EPA-certified wood-burning unit, a gas unit or a pellet unit," said Steve Pulone, an administrator for the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association, a group of manufacturers and retailers that has formed a partnership with the air district to offer the discounts.

Buying new gas logs, which would replace wood burning, also qualifies under the program, Pulone said.

EPA-certified stoves or fireplace inserts shouldn't smoke, Pulone said. If they have visible emissions, they need cleaning or the proper fuel, which must be hard and dry, he said.

Only some retailers are participating in the program. Retailers may require site inspections in some cases, including the replacement of old wood-burning stoves.

The discounts are: \$600 for gas and pellet stoves as well as for gas and pellet fireplace inserts, and \$300 for EPA-certified woodstoves, EPA-certified wood fireplace inserts and gas logs.

Free-standing gas stoves without discounts typically range from \$1,500 to \$3,500; pellet and EPA-certified woodstoves range from \$1,250 to \$3,000.

Prices of fireplace inserts are about the same as the stoves, while gas logs cost from \$350 and up, depending on the size.

## **Upgrading fireplaces could net homeowners up to \$600**

By Denis Cuff, Staff Writer

Contra Costa Times, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008

The Bay Area's clean air agency is going to pay homeowners to decrease the amount of smoke their chimneys spew.

Rebates of as much as \$600 will be offered to Bay Area households that replace smoky fireplaces and old stoves with low-emission stoves, fireplace inserts or gas heated logs, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District announced Tuesday.

Consumers can seek the rebates on a first-come, first-served basis through March 31, or until the \$100,000 set aside for the program is used up.

Air district officials say they want to reduce fine-particle pollution, a winter health threat associated with lung and heart ailments, and premature death.

"This is an incentive aimed at those who are already thinking about making a change to cleaner technology in the home," said Karen Schkolnick, a spokeswoman for the nine-county district. "Particulate matter is our biggest pollution problem in wintertime."

The rebates are available at hearth and fire appliance stores in the Bay Area that have signed up to participate in the program.

A list of the 15 stores is available at <http://www.change4cleanair.org>.

Most stores offer the rebates as a discount on the purchase price.

Many of the stores are sweetening the pot by offering additional rebates of as much as \$150. The district will offer rebates of \$600 for installing low-emission, free-standing pellet and gas stoves, or fireplace inserts heated by gas or pellets.

The \$300 incentives will be offered for converting homes to Environmental Protection Agency-certified wood stoves, wood-burning fireplace inserts or gas-heated ceramic logs.

The air district is investigating other methods of improving air quality, including developing a policy that would ban wood fires on bad air nights.

## **UN Warns of Biofuels' Environmental Risk**

By Michael Casey, The Associated Press

Washington Post, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008

BANGKOK, Thailand -- The world's rush to embrace biofuels is causing a spike in the price of corn and other crops and could worsen water shortages and force poor communities off their land, a U.N. official said Wednesday.

Speaking at a regional forum on bioenergy, Regan Suzuki of the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization acknowledged that biofuels are better for the environment than fossil fuels and boost energy security for many countries.

However, she said those benefits must be weighed against the pitfalls \_ many of which are just now emerging as countries convert millions of acres to palm oil, sugar cane and other crops used to make biofuels.

"Biofuels have become a flash point through which a wide range of social and environmental issues are currently being played out in the media," Suzuki told delegates at the forum, sponsored by the U.N. and the Thai government.

Foremost among the concerns is increased competition for agricultural land, which Suzuki warned has already caused a rise in corn prices in the United States and Mexico and could lead to food shortages in developing countries.

She also said China and India could face worsening water shortages because biofuels require large amounts of water, while forests in Indonesia and Malaysia could face threats from the expansion of palm oil plantations.

"Particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, land availability is a critical issue," Suzuki said. "There are clear comparative advantages for tropical and subtropical countries in growing biofuel feed stocks but it is often these same countries in which resource and land rights of vulnerable groups and protected forests are weakest."

Initially, biofuels were held up as a panacea for countries struggling to cope with the rising cost of oil or those looking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The European Union, for example, plans to replace 10 percent of transport fuel with biofuels made from energy crops such as sugar cane and rapeseed oil by 2020.

But in recent months, scientists, private agencies and even the British government have said biofuels could do more harm than good. Rather than protecting the environment, they say energy crops destroy natural forests that actually store carbon and thus are a key tool in the fight to reduce global warming.

Some of those doubts were on display Wednesday at the U.N. forum, with experts saying many countries in Asia have rolled out plans to mandate biofuels for transport without weighing the potential risks.

Thailand, for example, is considering delaying the introduction of diesel blended with 2 percent biofuel for two months until April because of palm oil shortages, while the Philippines is considering shelving a biofuels law over concerns about the negative environmental effects.

India is facing criticism that its plans to plant 30 million acres of jatropha trees by 2012 for biofuel could force communities from their land and worsen deforestation. There are also concerns that it will be unable to find the 100 million acres of vacant land it needs to grow the shrub-like plants.

Varghese Paul, a forest and biodiversity expert with the Energy and Resources Institute in India, said dependence on a single species is dangerous.

"An outbreak of pests and diseases could wipe out entire plantations in one stroke," Paul said.

## **Board acts to limit new schools near freeways**

### **L.A. Unified officials will have to do more to reduce students' exposure to airborne pollution.**

By Evelyn Larrubia, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

L.A. Times, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008

Making broad pronouncements about the need to protect the health of children in their care, the Los Angeles Board of Education on Tuesday restricted the district's ability to build schools near freeways and other sources of air pollution.

After a string of public speakers supporting the measure and impassioned debate, the board approved a resolution calling for the school system to study airborne pollutants up to half a mile from a potential site, rather than the current quarter mile requirement. It also seeks air quality

health-risk assessments for all schools, including charter schools, although officials said it is unclear whether they could force the independently run but publicly-funded schools to do so.

"Basically I'm trying to push the envelope as far as we can," said board member Yolie Flores Aguilar, who co-wrote the resolution with board member Julie Korenstein.

Flores Aguilar took on the issue after The Times reported in September that the district continued to build schools close to freeways, despite a state law discouraging it and recent studies indicating that children living near them showed signs of increased respiratory harm. About 60,000 Los Angeles Unified School District students attend campuses within 500 feet of a freeway.

The board also gave the superintendent a month to produce a list of schools where children are at the highest risk from air pollution and, by late March, to come up with a plan to reduce that exposure.

The board action does not change state law, which allows schools within 500 feet of major roadways despite the risks if the board finds the pollution "unavoidable" and overrides it.

However, Flores Aguilar said her resolution fixes a glitch in state law that did not require school systems to consider the effect of ultra-fine particles -- which researchers now believe carry the most noxious pollutants. Those particles are too small to be filtered by heating and air-conditioning systems.

Board member Tamar Galatzan, the lone dissenting vote, said that with budget cuts looming she couldn't support the proposal without a full financial analysis.

Officials said the district expects to lose \$460 million in state funds next year.

But her fiscal argument lost to what board members said they felt was a moral imperative.

One after another, they said that they or a family member suffered from asthma.

"I so understand what it means to not be able to breathe," Flores Aguilar said, tearing up. She was born with a severely narrow trachea, requiring time in oxygen tents as a child.

Marguerite LaMotte said her family gave its life savings -- including LaMotte's college fund -- to a charlatan who promised to cure her mother's severe asthma. He failed. "I can do nothing but support it," she said.

District officials said it will cost practically nothing to extend the distance of air quality analysis. The costs of retooling existing schools to limit exposure are unknown. But the resolution does not require the work to be done, and Flores Aguilar said there may be grants available.

Supt. David L. Brewer, also an asthma sufferer, hinted that the funds could come from future bond measures if the community has the "political will" to protect children's health.

## **Rebuilding the Rec**

### **District to look at options for recovering after fire**

By Doug Keeler, Midway Driller Editor

Taft Midway Driller, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008

The West Side Recreation and Park District is starting the preliminary plans for building a new youth recreation center.

A month after a fire destroyed The Foundry, which was owned by the district but operated by the Westside Believers Fellowship, the district is considering its options on how best to use the insurance money to fund a new building.

The old location, at 300 Main Street, is probably not going to be the site of the new building.

District Administrator Don Koenig said one option would be to obtain land owned by the Taft Moose Lodge adjacent to the Community Center for a new youth center.

He spoke about the tentative plans at last week's meeting of the district's board of directors.

The Main Street property is too small for a center, and handicapped access laws would probably require building a two or three-story building on that site, Koenig said.

The district could get more than \$3 million from insurance to build a new building, Koenig said, and pay just a \$2,000 deductible.

Koenig suggested a town hall meeting to get public input on what kind of a new center should be built.

Board Chairman Bill McPherson said the Dec. 26 fire that destroyed the old building could turn into a blessing for the district and the community.

"As much of a tragedy as this is, this is an opportunity to put in something that's state of the art and speaks to this generation better than the old Rec did," he said.

The old building had been operated as a youth center called the Foundry by the Westside Believers Fellowship since the district said it could no longer afford to keep it open and threatened to close it.

The cause of the fire hasn't been determined. Koenig said the district's insurance carriers want to have their own investigator look for a cause before demolition is completed.

That could take some time.

"Their fire investigate or wants to do it like an archaeological dig," Koenig said.

That means removing the charred rubble bit-by-bit while the investigators tried to find out what touched off the fire.

"We'd like to get demolition done as soon as possible," Koenig said.

But that is going to be complicated by the investigation and several factors, including a survey for asbestos, its removal, as well as permits from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The building was destroyed by a fire that broke out at midday on Dec. 16.

The Kern County Fire Department said the cause hasn't been determined but is believed to be accidental.

## **U.S. Given Poor Marks on the Environment**

By Felicity Barringer

N.Y. Times, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008

WASHINGTON — A new international ranking of environmental performance puts the United States at the bottom of the Group of 8 industrialized nations and 39th among the 149 countries on the list.

European nations dominate the top places in the ranking, which evaluates sanitation, greenhouse gas emissions, agricultural policies, air pollution and 20 other measures to formulate an overall score, with 100 the best possible.

The top 10 countries, with scores of 87 or better, were led by Switzerland, Sweden, Norway and Finland. The others at the top were Austria, France, Latvia, Costa Rica, Colombia and New Zealand, the leader in the 2006 version of the analysis, which is conducted by researchers at Yale and Columbia Universities.

“We are putting more weight on [climate change](#),” said Daniel Esty, the report’s lead author, who is the director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy. “Switzerland is the most greenhouse gas efficient economy in the developed world,” he said, in part because of its use of hydroelectric power and its transportation system, which relies more on trains than individual cars or trucks.

The United States, with a score of 81.0, he noted, “is slipping down,” both because of low scores on three different analyses of greenhouse gas emissions and a pervasive problem with smog. The country’s performance on a new indicator that measures regional smog, he said, “is at the bottom of the world right now.”

He added, “The U.S. continues to have a bottom-tier performance in greenhouse gas emissions.”

The list, which is to be released Wednesday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, is the fourth, and most refined, of a series of rankings first issued in 2002. Because of methodological changes, the list this year is not directly comparable to the last one, issued in 2006, in which the United States was ranked 28th.

James Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, said the problem with ozone, which is formed by chemical reactions between oxides of nitrogen, volatile organic compounds and sunlight, was being addressed by the Bush administration in new rules to curb emissions of those chemicals from power plants and from the burning of diesel fuels.

“We recognized this about five years ago,” he said. “We have a program that in the next 10 years is going to address this in a really big way,” with “more than a 90 percent cut” in diesel emissions from trucks and off-road engines like those in construction equipment.

The United States’ low ranking in measures like the amount of carbon dioxide emissions per capita or per unit of electricity — in the bottom 20 percent — is not surprising, Mr. Connaughton said, because the United States contributes a quarter of the new releases of greenhouse gas emissions.

In recent years, he added, the United States has improved its carbon intensity — the output of emissions relative to economic growth. In Europe and Japan, he said, “intensity is not improving as fast, but many of these countries started in a better place.”

The country’s success in cleaning its air and water, he said, now allows policy makers to focus on improving carbon emissions.

India, China and Australia ranked among the bottom 25 nations in the indicator that combined all the climate change scores; China and Australia ranked below the United States. As with earlier versions of the index, the authors created separate lists of countries that are considered peers, either economically or geographically, and scored the performance of nations in those subgroups.

New Zealand and Japan led the Asian-Pacific nations, with performance scores of 88.9 and 84.5. Croatia (84.6) and Albania (84.0) led the list of Eastern European and Central Asian countries, which takes in most of the former sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, not including the Baltic nations. Mauritius (78.1), whose per capita domestic product outstrips those in the other countries of sub-Saharan Africa, led this group, just above Gabon (77.3).

Costa Rica (90.5), Colombia (88.3) and Canada (86.6) led the 26 countries of the Americas; Haiti (60.7) was last in this group.

Belgium (78.4) continued to rank near the bottom of the 28 European nations.

“Belgium remains a shock,” said Professor Esty, who said the heavily industrialized country, riven by centuries-old ethnic quarrels, was 57th among the 149 nations. “Of those ahead of them, only 10 are richer,” he added.

Christine Kim, a research associate of Professor Esty’s, calculated that a country’s wealth, measured as gross domestic product per capita, tended to correlate with a strong performance on such indicators as sanitation, indoor air quality and success in combating diseases — but also with a poor performance on greenhouse gas emissions and agricultural policies.

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008:](#)

### **Place air monitors fairly**

I read a recent letter in the paper regarding Tejon Ranch, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the results of the air monitor.

It's one thing to call the mitigation agreement a backroom deal and it's another thing to prove that allegation.

Should developers pay mitigation fees for air pollution? In the end it's the homebuyers who pay these fees. Does this agreement really violate CEQA?

I don't know anyone who likes pollution, but, let's be fair about our judgments. The monitor was placed in the CalTrans yard located at Peace Valley Road and Frazier Mountain Park Road. This is located next to an interstate freeway, probably the busiest one in this country, and an off-ramp where all the traffic gets off to come in and out of this area to live, work and buy goods.

If you want fair readings, place monitors at El Tejon School, Lebec, Frazier Park and at Frazier Mountain High School. Compare those results with the data already collected and then make judgements.

*Frank Williams, Frazier Park*

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wed., Jan. 23, 2008:](#)

### **Cleaner cars will get cheaper in the future**

I'd like to respond to Rod Jenson's concern (letter Dec. 31) that electric cars, while helpful in reducing smog, may ultimately strain the electrical grid and not be a cheaper source of power.

With enterprising private research and development, there are likely to be a number of options within the next 10 years, both for more plentiful electricity, but also for cars that can be plugged into our own solar panels to recharge the batteries -- requiring no electricity.

In the beginning, these units may seem expensive, but the technology needs to be supported in order to improve. I, for one, would way rather pay a higher price to help develop this clean air technology than to continue to be ripped-off daily by the oil interests.

In the Jan. 3 Bee was an article about a Dutch company using a solar road energy system to siphon "the heat from roads and parking lots to heat homes and offices." According to the article, the sun radiates to Earth more watts in one hour than the world can use in a whole year.

This type of innovation, with this mostly untapped, clean, solar resource, brings much hope for the future.

*Billie Jo Emery, Fresno*

Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the budget that was distributed to SJVAPCD, which is considered to be insufficient in order to improve air quality in California. For more information, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

### **Consideran insuficiente presupuesto para garantizar mejor aire en California**

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Wednesday, January 23, 2008

La Oficina Distrital para el Control de la Contaminación del Aire del Valle de San Joaquín en California informó que tendrá un presupuesto insuficiente para garantizar que pueda mejorar el aire que respiran cientos de miles de personas.

Esa oficina obtendría un cuarto de millón de dólares como presupuesto, basado en una redistribución de recursos estatales que se aprobó en referendo.

La nueva distribución otorga más del doble de presupuesto a Los Ángeles.

Los Ángeles es la zona con la peor contaminación del aire en Estados Unidos, pero el Valle de San Joaquín le sigue en segundo lugar nacional en esa clasificación.

La oficina distrital estima que necesitaría por lo menos 120 millones más en recursos.