

Toxic wood a concern in ag burning

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Thursday, November 28, 2002, 5:33 AM)

Environmental lawyers are urging San Joaquin Valley air officials to closely inspect farm waste burning because chemically treated wood buried in some burn piles would spew dangerous, toxic plumes.

The wood, used as grape stakes, is embedded in tons of debris when farmers bulldoze vineyards on tens of thousands of acres.

It is illegal to burn such treated wood. San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials said they inspect each vineyard pile thoroughly.

Still, environmentalists worry that Valley residents might be exposed to smoke from wood treated with chromated copper arsenate, a preservative that is regulated as a toxic substance.

Health officials said the arsenate, or arsenic, which has long been associated with cancer, attacks the liver and kidneys.

"I don't think I'd want to be in small towns like Reedley, Dinuba or Cutler-Orosi if this stuff is burned," said respiratory therapist Kevin Hamilton, who is an asthma educator. "It enters your system very quickly when it is breathed."

Landfill burial is considered the only safe disposal, but burning is less costly.

Lawyers from the Sierra Club and Earthjustice in San Francisco fear burning will take place because the wood is concealed inside 10- to 15-foot piles where it might not be detected. After the piles are created, generally they are ready to burn.

"The hazards posed by this threatened illegal activity require diligent oversight by your agency," the lawyers wrote to the district. "No unsorted pile should be allowed to burn until district staff has inspected it."

A Fresno-area Sierra Club member photographed treated wood in vineyard piles around Reedley. The member, Kevin Hall, said more than 30 piles next to Reed Avenue were 2.5 miles north of Reedley College.

"The bottom line is that this burning has to be stopped," Hall said. "There's a city right downwind."

The piles near Reed Avenue will not burn with treated wood in them, said district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. And legal burns will be spread out over many days so the smoke won't overwhelm communities.

"Inspectors also will be assessing the proximity to hospitals, schools and residences," Bello said. "If it's not safe, they won't allow the burn."

Farmer Paul Betancourt, former Fresno County Farm Bureau president, said farmers are not looking for a license to pollute.

"We live here," he said. "We breathe the same air. Are there incidental problems? Of course. But we want to be good neighbors."

There is a lot of vineyard burning this year because of a downturn in the raisin industry. Oversupply has caused prices to drop, leaving some growers on the brink of bankruptcy. Many have been forced to tear out vineyards, grape stakes and all.

Grape stakes made of untreated redwood can remain in the pile. But stakes made of metal or treated wood must be taken out.

For financially struggling farmers who have already removed their vineyards, public officials are talking with raisin organizations in hopes of finding money to help them pay for sorting out the treated wood.

"I heard one grower say it might cost \$1,000 to break apart one of those piles and remove the treated wood," said Fresno County Supervisor Judy Case, who is also an air district board member. "We're trying to help them do the right thing. But we're not going to break our own rule and allow burning of treated wood."

The reporter can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com or 441-6316.

Viewpoint / Controversy crackles: Ban on wood-burning fireplaces has readers fuming

Saturday November 30, 2002, 05:45:08 PM, Bakersfield Californian

Not in my backyard

I'm once again amazed by the residents of our area. The fireplace controversy is one more case of "not in my backyard."

Everyone wants clean air, but not if it infringes upon their right to burn wood in their fireplaces. But what about my right to be able to walk in my neighborhood on a crisp, clear night and enjoy the stars without having an asthma attack?

Even just taking the trash out can create difficulty breathing because of all the smoke in the air. It's not like the air board is saying "don't use your fireplaces at all." I believe they were talking about an estimated 20 nights out of the entire winter.

There are several things that cause my asthma to act up. Dairies are not on that list, but wood smoke ranks right at the top. Please, give my lungs a break and don't burn on "no burn" nights.

KAREN PIERCE, Bakersfield

Letters to the Bakersfield Californian

Letter was threatening

I take exception to Dianne Hardisty's recent column regarding Robert McNinch's "non-threatening" letter about the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District's proposed fireplace-use limitations.

Just scan The Californian's archives for stories about the Volpe family murders to understand the APCD employee's emotional response to McNinch's letter. Even more current was the preceding day's Local Section story about the lawyer arrested for using a shotgun to threaten Bakersfield code compliance officers when they arrived to clean up his messy yard.

Likely the APCD employee mentioned in Hardisty's column saw McNinch's letter as personally threatening (at worst) or potentially inflammatory to someone of Robert Courtney's (the Volpe family murderer's) ilk.

What if the letter had said, "Anyone who continues to publish news stories or editorials supporting (or opposing) this (hot button issue) had better be armed and prepared to die for his (or her) stupidity?" Still not threatening?

I agree the APCD proposal is downright silly. If McNinch or The Californian wants to circulate a petition to prohibit banning the use of residential fireplaces, I'd sign it in a heartbeat. That is a much more appropriate response to a misguided government proposal.

The Californian and McNinch should apologize to all code enforcement employees. They perform the thankless jobs of writing parking tickets, making slumlords improve living conditions for their renters, getting horrible neighbors to clean up their yards, and yes, even enforcing a fireplace ban if one was to be legally enacted. They don't deserve to be threatened with death for doing those things on our behalf.

RON CHAMBERS, Bakersfield

Thanks for support

Thank Dianne Hardisty for calling District Attorney Ed Jagels' bluff and for sticking up for letter writer Robert McNinch. He certainly expressed my sentiment and I don't even have a fireplace.

But there is still a matter of The Californian addressing the real polluters of the Valley: diesel trucks and cows.

SAM HEATH, Bodfish

Get a grip, it's a rule

OK, we all agree that the ordinance regulating when we can use our fireplaces is displeasing to most of us, including myself. But why would someone threaten the life of a person who is just doing his job?

The San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District inspectors didn't create this ordinance. They will only enforce it (or try to). These people have families, wives, children, mothers and fathers who love them! They have to make a living the same as anyone else.

For heaven's sake, why would anyone consider doing such a violent, murderous, repulsive thing over a such a small matter? Gosh, get a little perspective here.

If you want to block the ordinance, write a letter to the district's board. Make placards and protest! Don't threaten to harm a fellow citizen who is just doing his job. Do you have any idea what the consequences would be? Are you willing to face the death penalty and destroy your own family over a fire in your fireplace? The writer owes the SJVAPCD inspectors an apology for his rash words. I'm surprised there isn't an ordinance against making threats on other people's lives. Shame on you!

DIANNE YOUNT, Bakersfield

Pollute, complain less

The pollution index was an officially "unhealthy" 106 today -- meaning we are poisoning ourselves with each breath and we are that much closer to dying.

A day earlier, The Californian published a spate of letters from fuming "me-firsters" asserting their God-given right to burn and pollute. No government...blah...blah...blah...is going to keep them from using their fireplaces. What was funny was how confused and simplistic these people are. One writer foamed his visceral defiance of a government he described as "fascist," while the next writer raged against the same government, but called it "socialist."

Well, hell, this is Bakersfield, isn't it? Come on, people, this isn't about ideology. It

is about "ecology." Why don't we all clear the air by burning less, driving less and complaining less?

BILL LEONG Jr., Bakersfield

LETTERS TO FRESNO BEE

Gas logs logical

By Joann Schilling

Fresno

(Published Friday, November 29, 2002, 5:18 AM)

I agree with Harald Frieser, who wrote (letter Nov. 23) that gas logs are better than inserts. Inserts may be a more efficient way to heat a house than using a fireplace. However, most people want a fireplace for the aesthetic value, not for saving energy. It's not easy to sell a house without one.

I also agree that we have some of the worst air in the nation. Childhood asthma is at extremely high levels. Adults, too, suffer from breathing the bad Valley air. Fireplace smoke compounds the problem.

When my family lived in the Midwest, we usually only had a fire when we had a party. What a hassle! We had to drag the logs in, hope they were dry enough to burn, stay up until the last ember died, and remember to close the damper when the ashes were burned out (or all the heat would go straight up the chimney).

As busy as most families are today, who has the time to tend a fire properly? I'll bet most fireplaces aren't even used on a regular basis. If we want to see the beauty of a fire and to hear our children breathe freely, more homeowners should opt for gas logs, rather than wood-burning fireplaces or even fireplace inserts.

LETTERS TO FRESNO BEE

Fine example

By Lauren Everett

Fresno

(Published Saturday, November 30, 2002, 4:49 AM)

I applaud the leaders of industry in our Valley who have come together to clean

up our air. Their group, Clean Air Now, should not only be a blessing to us, the people of the Valley, but an inspiration as well.

This kind of leadership is what we need in the effort to reduce pollution and correct the damage that has already been done. As President Bush continues to relax auto emission standards and goals for fuel-efficient cars, it is imperative that we begin to take responsibility for the health of our air and to ourselves.

This is not something that should be put off for the future; if we do not begin to solve problems and take good care of our environment, there might not be a future to look to. Even though it will take time and effort, it will be worth it.

As Bob Maddux, president of Clean Air Now's board said, " We need public education and personal responsibility." I thank Mr. Maddux and participants in the Clean Air Now project for taking responsibility and providing a solution as well as an example to the people of the San Joaquin Valley.

LETTERS TO FRESNO BEE

Everyone's problem

By Sara Savary
Fresno

(Published Thursday, November 28, 2002, 5:18 AM)

If we, as a community, want to force farmers to spend thousands of dollars to get rid of their diesel pumps, then we, as a community, shouldn't complain when we are asked to spend hundreds of dollars to fix our fireplaces or heat our homes with gas.

If we want farmers to stop burning wood, then everyone should stop. We are all part of the problem. It is about time we all became part of the solution and stopped whining about it.

No one seems to care if farmers can afford the fixes or not. Everyone thinks someone else should pay for the solutions. Everyone thinks that someone else should change what he or she is doing to solve the problem. This kind of thinking is getting us nowhere.

If you can't take the heat (or cold, as the case may be), get out of the kitchen. I hear Arizona is nice.

Viewpoint / Darrell Sparks: Realtors fear ban would inflate cost of new homes, resales in Kern

Saturday November 30, 2002, 05:45:08 PM, Bakersfield Californian

I, like many Kern County residents, was shocked to see the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's proposal to limit the use of wood-burning fireplaces and stoves in our homes.

Upon investigation, it was disturbing to see the many infringements on property rights and housing affordability the proposed amendments to Rule 4901 would impose. I also have a concern for those who have wood-burning fireplaces and stoves as their only source of heat.

The proposal to require point-of-sale mandates when a house changes title through a sale hinders housing affordability. The cost of retrofitting fireplaces and wood stoves can incur large contractor fees, causing the home price to increase dramatically. During a sale, both the buyer and seller are usually stretched to the maximum. Even a minor increase in cost can derail transactions.

Point-of-sale mandates will cause many prospective homebuyers to be priced out of the market. This specifically applies to entry-to-moderate-level homebuyers.

Requiring retrofit at the point-of-sale will not produce a successful reduction in emissions from wood-burning devices because it only affects a small portion of property owners in Kern County. Annually, on average, there is only a 3 percent transfer of single-family zoned property of the 157,126 single-family zoned properties in Kern County.

Furthermore, not all of these homes have wood-burning devices and not all that do are used on a frequent basis. Such an important health and safety issue should not produce this small of a result in air pollution.

Limiting a buyer's choice of the type of fireplace they may have in their new home is an infringement on their property rights. It limits choice as the type of home they wish to live in. This enactment would force developers to discriminately decide which new homebuyer gets a wood-burning fireplace and which would not. This is not a practical measure to implement.

I consider air quality to be a top priority to sustaining a quality of life in the San Joaquin Valley. Poor air quality affects all valley residents. Quality of life is sustained when there is a balance between maintaining issues, such as clean air, affordable housing and preservation of property rights. One should not be implemented at the expense of another.

These amendments, if enacted, would sacrifice housing affordability and property

rights with little or no improvements to air quality.
Darrell Sparks is president of the Bakersfield Association of Realtors

Viewpoint / Chris Caron: Rule not 'done deal,' attend workshops, express concerns

Saturday November 30, 2002, 05:45:08 PM, Bakersfield Californian

It's time for the public to get involved in the wood burning regulations debate. Help clear the air, not only of wood smoke, but of the confusion being spread by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the media.

News flash Residential fireplaces and wood stoves do not produce 30 percent of the valley's winter PM10 emissions. State laws prohibiting the use of fireplaces have not been adopted yet.

How is it that much of the valley's media has mis-reported that wood burning in fireplaces and wood stoves create 30 percent of winter PM10 emissions? A 1999 California Air Resources Board inventory of areawide sources in the San Joaquin Valley indicates residential fuel combustion (fireplaces and woodstoves) only produces about 3 percent of the average daily PM10-emissions in the valley.

However, the Valley Air District claims that on the worst high-pollution winter days, residential wood combustion may contribute up to 30 percent of PM10 emissions. This appears to be based on a December 1995 emissions study. During a three-day period, a single emission-monitoring site in downtown Fresno recorded up to 30 percent of PM10 emissions to be from organic, vegetative material sources believed to be from residential wood combustion. Is the district advocating mandatory burn restrictions for the entire valley based on one bad air event in Fresno seven years ago?

It is disingenuous for the district to claim fireplaces produce a significant amount of valley pollution based on very limited, old air monitoring. If the district has more recent scientific facts, we hope it will share this information with the public. Has the media independently confirmed the district's facts? The media needs to do a better job of critically investigating the basis for the district's proposals before getting the public stirred into a frenzy on "proposed" fireplace restrictions.

We are not implying wintertime residential wood combustion doesn't have some impact on the valley's air quality. On "bad air" days, when climatic inversions build, holding pollutants closer to the ground, residential wood smoke can be problematic in certain parts of the valley. But emissions from residential wood combustion may not be as bad as claimed. The problem may not be bad enough to justify the proposed restrictions.

Residents throughout the valley have a right to be angry about the district staff claiming the "proposed" wood-burning regulations will be mandatory next year. Anyone who reads or sees some of the recent news stories, or hears the district's radio advertisements might think it's a done deal. The truth is, the district must complete a formal rule-making process, which includes public hearings and district board approval. The board doesn't vote on the proposed regulations until next March or April. It is irresponsible for the district staff to promote and advertise the proposed rules as becoming mandatory next year.

The public should also be concerned that the district has focused only on expensive, long-term solutions for reducing residential wood smoke, while intentionally overlooking inexpensive and low-emission solutions, such as promoting cleaner-burning manufactured firelogs that would reduce emissions from fireplaces immediately.

Duraflame Inc. recently sponsored an independent survey about fireplace usage in the valley and some of the district's proposed fireplace regulations. Few people were found to accept the district's recommendations that they convert their fireplace to new technology at an average cost of \$800 to \$3,000. A majority of valley residents were also against the district's proposal to dramatically limit traditional open fireplaces in new homes. Many people said they would just continue burning wood in their fireplaces on future mandatory no-burn nights the district proposes.

Some in the media have editorialized that valley residents have their heads in the sand and aren't willing to accept the reality of the wintertime air pollution problem. Duraflame's survey revealed residents are concerned about air quality and support the district's role in reducing emissions.

People in the valley are open to change and want to do the right thing. They just want cost-effective, practical and less intrusive solutions to the problem. For example, Duraflame's survey showed that when valley residents are told manufactured firelogs produce two-thirds fewer particulate emissions than burning wood in fireplaces, 42 percent of residents who now burn wood in their fireplaces would consider switching to firelogs.

We aren't so naïve to think burning firelogs is the only solution to the complicated wintertime air quality problems in the valley. A change in burning practices on high pollution days and an eventual migration to cleaner-burning fireplaces and stoves also is warranted. But the research speaks for itself. If the district encourages residents to burn manufactured firelogs in open fireplaces, many people will change their burning practices. There will be a dramatic, immediate reduction in particulate emissions during winter months. There will be fewer mandatory no-burn nights.

We are just one voice, however. If people want cost-effective choices to improve air quality, they should get involved in the debate over the future of wood-burning fireplaces and stoves. Attend the district's workshops scheduled for Dec. 3 to

Dec. 5 in Fresno, Bakersfield and Modesto. If you can't attend the public meetings, submit comments in writing to the district by Dec. 20. For more information on locations and workshop times call the District at (559) 230-6000 or visit the district's internet Web site; www.valleyair.org.
Chris Caron of Stockton is vice president of Duraflame Inc.

Sunday

LETTERS TO FRESNO BEE

'Which is it?'

By Chris Caron
Vice President, Duraflame Inc., Stockton
(Published Sunday, December 1, 2002, 5:05 AM)

The Valley air district claims that residential wood combustion causes 30% of winter PM-10 emissions. Yet a 1999 California Air Resources Board emission inventory for the San Joaquin Valley indicates residential fuel combustion (fireplaces and woodstoves) only produces about 3% of the average daily PM-10 emissions in the Valley. So which is it?

The public should demand the air district substantiate its claims, and the media should critically investigate the district's statements before publishing them.

District staff is also misleading the public by claiming its "proposed" wood-burning regulations will be mandatory next year. The truth is the district staff must complete a formal rule-making process and submit its proposals to the district board for a vote, which isn't scheduled until next March or April.

In its rush to judgment, what else has the district misled or failed to tell the public about? How about cost-effective alternative fuels for fireplaces like manufactured fire logs?

Independent research proves manufactured fire logs produce two-thirds fewer emissions than burning wood in fireplaces. If the district encouraged people to burn fire logs in their fireplaces, there would be a dramatic, immediate reduction in particulate emissions during winter months, resulting in fewer of the district's "proposed" mandatory "no burn" nights.

People can tell the district they want cost-effective choices to improve air quality. Attend the public workshops the district has scheduled on this issue Dec. 3-5. Workshop times and locations are available by calling the district at (559) 230-

6000 or by visiting the district's Web site: www.valleyair.org
<http://www.valleyair.org>.

Don't light your fire this holiday

The Bakersfield Californian

Wednesday November 27, 2002, 10:10:06 PM

Don't light your fire this holiday

Air quality officials are asking residents to go without a comforting fire in the hearth for Thanksgiving to cut down on pollution.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District declared a "Please Don't Light Tonight" alert for Wednesday night and today during the day. The voluntary alerts are issued when weather conditions are expected to trap pollution from wood burning near the ground, where soot can cause breathing difficulty and unsightly skies.

The alert lasts until 4 p.m. today, and does not apply to people for whom wood is the only source of heat. During this time, residents are asked not to use their fireplaces and woodstoves. The alerts are expected to become mandatory next year.

For more information, call the air district at 326-6900 or visit www.valleyair.org.

P.M. Update: Boy injured when illegal bonfire explodes

By Louis Galvan

The Fresno Bee

(Published Friday, November 29, 2002, 1:53 PM)

A 17-year-old Lemoore boy was burned on the face and hands when gasoline used to light a bonfire exploded Thanksgiving evening at a farm home north of Sanger, Fresno County Fire Department officials reported.

The boy, whose name was not made public because of his age, was treated at Community Regional Burn Center at University Medical Center and released.

Battalion Chief Rick Moore said the boy appeared to have second- and third-degree burns on the face and first-degree burns on the hands. Moore said shock waves from the explosion busted the window of a home 100 yards away from the bonfire. No other injuries were reported, however.

Moore said the incident should serve as good reminder about the dangers of using gasoline to start fires. Not only as it illegal, he said, the practice could result in tragic consequences.

The explosion was reported shortly after 5 p.m. at 3079 N. Indianola Ave. near East Shields Avenue at the family home of Thelma Stanearth, Moore said.

Moore said members of the family had been piling farm trimmings and other materials into a pit to burn.

The 17-year-old, identified as a friend of the family, reportedly was standing next to the pile with Phil Stanearth, 22, a son of the property owner, when the pile was lit after it was doused with gasoline.

Phil Stanearth, who was not injured, was cited for burning without a permit and also for burning on a non-burning day.

Moore said the incident also shows the importance of obtaining a fire permit.

Had a permit been requested, he said, the family would've learned that Thursday was not a burn day.

And had a permit been granted, he said, the family also would've received a list of rules and safety regulations, including a warning that gasoline cannot be used.

According to the American Burn Association, each year more than 140,000 gasoline-related fires are reported in the United States, and 500 people die and thousands more are injured.

Most cases involving gasoline, however, can be prevented, according to the association.

Its message: Gasoline has only one function - to fuel an engine.

The reporter can be reached at lgalvan@fresnobee.com or 441-6139.

Getting there from here

By TIM BRAGG, PERCY EDNALINO and OLIVIA REYES GARCIA, Californian staff writers e-mail:

Saturday November 30, 2002, 10:31:12 PM

One look at the air in Bakersfield on a late summer afternoon will tell you. Waiting through three light cycles at the intersection of Stockdale Highway and California

Avenue during rush hour will tell you.
And, if you listen, history will tell you.

Growing cities need public transportation -- buses, trolleys, light rail.

In Bakersfield's case, that means GET, the Golden Empire Transit bus system.

It's all we've got, and we need it, according to air pollution watchdogs, planning gurus and transit officials.

The only problem is getting people on board.

One passenger summed up his experiences -- as well as the hopes of public transit in general -- on a recent trip down Rosedale Highway to the Northwest Promenade shopping center.

"It'll get there eventually," Dennis Turner said of his lengthy ride on regional transit from Wasco linking to GET for the last leg to the shopping center.

That philosophy could also extend to the general attitude toward public transportation. Once gridlock settles in and the average commute takes closer to an hour -- rather than the 22 minutes it generally takes now, according to 2000 Census figures -- people might find GET much more attractive.

In other words, we'll get there -- eventually.

But for now Turner said of the bus, "it's OK." If he had a choice, however, he'd be driving a car.

He's in good company.

For the most part, people in Bakersfield have not embraced public transit.

Out of 74,618 commuters, 873 people said they took a bus or trolley to work, according to the 1990 Census. That's about 1.1 percent.

The 2000 Census reported 1,617 people said they took the bus or trolley to work out of 99,769 commuters. That's about 1.6 percent of total commuters.

"I think public transit is going to start fitting in better as people realize more and more that there are limited dollars we have to put into road improvements," said Marilyn Beardslee, a senior planner with the Kern Council of Governments. "But it is a hard sell at the moment."

As far as bus systems go, GET isn't a bad one.

In fact, it's been favorably rated in a nationwide study by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte that looked at bus systems over a 10-year period.

GET placed among the country's top 50 public transit companies between 1992 and 1998 -- the last year for which figures are available. That year, GET was ranked No. 43, which was down from its slot at No. 13 in 1991, but still respectable.

The study looked at systems for service, operating costs and ridership.

Bakersfield residents have shown a strong propensity for riding the bus under certain conditions.

In past years, GET used grants from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District that paid all fares whenever a "Spare the Air" day was declared.

The free rides were popular, too popular, GET's Chief Executive Officer Chester Moland said.

So many people jumped on the free rides that it overwhelmed the system's capacity, he said.

GET hasn't taken advantage of those or other grants offered by the air district recently, said Todd DeYoung of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Moland said the district has received grants from the air district in the past, but he said it doesn't always pay for the things GET needs.

"There are lots of grants available for capital projects, but our biggest need are funds to cover operational expenses," Moland said. "It's not going to help us to get new equipment if we don't have any way to pay for its operation."

Transit planners from other valley cities urged GET to keep up the good fight.

"(GET officials) need to sit down with the city general plan and try to encourage the growth to be much more dense," said John Downs, planning director for Fresno Area Express. "The average person living in a typical suburb can't function without a car."

He believed GET might have some leverage in planning because it's a separate governmental entity, not a division of the city, and could come to the planning table as an equal stakeholder to developers.

"If you change your planning directives so the places people want to go are closer to their homes, instead of 15 miles away, then bus transit becomes more feasible," he said.

Moland said the transit system has tried to encourage denser growth. But as subdivisions have continued to sprawl farther and farther out, those recommendations have, apparently, fallen on deaf ears.

Why?

"That's something you're going to have to ask the city and county planners about," he said.

County planners said they're just giving the people what they want.

"A lot of the more popular types of developments, if you look out in the Rosedale area, are single-family homes," said Kern County Planning Department Director Ted James.

Planners would like higher density, too. But they just can't sell it, he said.

Meanwhile, GET continues to chug along, struggling to serve residents of Bakersfield's far-flung subdivisions while trying to expand service for the heavily traveled routes at the city's core.

Northwest Bakersfield

When it comes to riding the bus in the northwest, the story is not where the bus goes, but where it doesn't.

If you want to ride the bus, and you live north of Hageman Road or west of Allen Road, you're hoofing it.

That's because neither of the two bus lines that serve most of the area north of the Kern River and west of Highway 99 go beyond those two streets.

"They don't go out far enough," Jami Mang said as she rode the No. 18 bus to the Northwest Promenade, where she got a transfer to the Route 14, so she and her 2-year-old son, Noah, could go downtown.

Mang and her son boarded at Allen Road and Rosedale Highway, a 20-minute walk from their home.

"When you have to walk that far, it takes quite a bit of time to get where you are going."

The routes serving the northwest do not run late at night, or on Sundays.

"We wanted to go to the library, but it was 7:30 (p.m.) and it was too late to go," Mang said. "The last bus would have gone out of service before we could get back."

Transit officials said expanded service will not come to northwest Bakersfield any time soon.

The area's relatively low population density, along with the fact that the district's boundaries go no farther west than Allen Road, limit the district's options for expanding service in the area, GET's Moland said.

"Even if we did expand the district, the revenue would not cover the costs to offer

new service," he said.

Although GET is a special district, it does not receive money from property taxes generated within it, said Cheryl Scott, GET's manager of marketing and service development. It gets the bulk of its money from the state and rider fares, with some money coming from the federal government.

Extending service west of Allen Road would require the district to annex land, a process Moland said the district hadn't been through since it annexed its current portion of northwest Bakersfield in 1981.

While Routes 14 and 18 are the main lines serving the area, another route, No. 1, makes a loop into Rosedale on Olive Drive, but it doesn't connect with 14 or 18.

Routes 14 and 18 have moderate ridership. According to GET, No. 14 had 122,797 rides in the 2001-02 fiscal year, while No. 18 had 37,004. By comparison, GET's busiest line, Route 5, between Valley Plaza and Bakersfield College, recorded more than 1.2 million rides during that same time.

Though most northwest riders would like to see expanded service, they say service is adequate.

Jacquelinee Prieto, a Liberty High School freshman who recently rode the bus to school, said GET buses are often more reliable than those run by the school district.

"People may not think so, but there's a lot of people out here who need to use the bus," she said.

Bus rider Monique Farios said Rosedale doesn't get a lot of service because it's not seen as needing it.

"Most of the people out here have cars," she said.

She predicted, however, that more northwest residents would use the bus if, and when, traffic worsens on already congested main streets.

According to Caltrans, about 41,000 vehicles flow through the intersection of Rosedale Highway and Highway 99 every 24 hours. Twenty years ago, the daily average was about 24,500.

Moland said northwest Bakersfield's relative affluence and dependence on cars does dim the area's prospects for future service a bit.

But he said a ridership survey to be done in early 2003 should give a clearer picture of whether changes are needed.

Meanwhile, thousands of houses are planned for the northwest in the near future,

just out of reach of bus lines.

"When you plan bus service, you want to serve areas that are going to be high traffic areas for transit, such as high concentrations of seniors, or young people," Moland said.

Right now, he said, Rosedale doesn't have many high traffic generators, other than the Northwest Promenade.

"Rosedale Highway is the primary route into the area, but there are not a lot of places where people are going to get on or off the bus along there until you get out to the shopping centers."

Those now using the bus in the northwest say they need it since most of the places they need to go are well out of walking or biking range.

It takes BC student Keith Jensen about an hour to get there.

One advantage, he said, is he can get homework done during his trip back.

The disadvantages?

"You have to plan out your trip."

And there are those little unexpected crises to deal with.

"I came back from class a little late one day and the bus left without me," Jensen said. "I went running after it, but it just took off without me, so I missed my transfer and had to wait another hour."

Ultimately, Jensen hopes his bus commuting days will be over in the not-too-distant future.

"Everybody wants a car," he said. "If I had one, I wouldn't be riding the bus."
Southwest Bakersfield

Eight bus routes serve southwest Bakersfield and GET officials said they'd like to expand into areas like the

Silver Creek neighborhood -- if they had the money.

The majority of riders using those routes are college and high school students.

In fact, three of the routes serving southwest Bakersfield have stops at Cal State Bakersfield and one of those three continues to Bakersfield College. Three other routes serve Stockdale, West and Ridgeview high schools.

Eldora Maize, 26, lives near West High School and has taken the bus since she was 16.

"It's cheaper to ride the bus. Twenty-five dollars a month, you can't beat that," she said. "Do I prefer riding the bus instead of driving? No, but it's cheaper."

Maize's \$25 buys her a Flash Pass, which is good for unlimited rides for a month.

She can't afford a car right now, but wouldn't hesitate to buy one if she could. With a car, she said, her social life would consist of more than just grocery shopping and classes at Bakersfield College.

"I don't go clubbing or any of that," she said. "If I want to visit someone I just ride the bus."

To get to BC, Maize takes the No. 9 bus to the Downtown Transit Center on Chester Avenue. From the downtown depot, she catches the No. 17 bus to campus.

Last year, the No. 9 route transported 666,472 people. The No. 17 moved 209,737 riders.

One of the least used routes in the southwest last year was the No. 15, to the Mervyn's on California Avenue, which had 109,814 boardings. The No. 16 route, which serves Ridgeview High and stops at both of GET's transit centers, had the district's lowest ridership last year with 9,504 boardings.

Depending on GET isn't a problem, except when she's running late, Maize said.

"Five minutes is OK, but 10 minutes kind of messes up your schedule," she said. "I don't have to be at school until 11:40 a.m. so I have to leave two hours early, sometimes 2 1/2 hours early, because if the bus is late then I'm late for school."

She praised the creation of the speedy Crosstown Express route, No. 17, which operates between the

Southwest Transit Center, Downtown Transit Center and Bakersfield College. That service was added in 1998, and runs every 15 minutes.

While Michael Richter, 17, is riding the bus now because he doesn't have a driver's license yet, he said he's not sure he'd switch to a car even if he did have his license.

Richter lives a few blocks from BC and takes the No.11 to get to classes at Cal State Bakersfield.

"It's nice and quiet," he said. "It gives me time to read assignments."

Last year, that bus was one of GET's busiest, handling 738,918 riders.

Lonnie Stewart, 42, has been riding the buses for more than 10 years. He said he prefers riding the bus -- even when he owned a car.

"It's less insurance, less gas and it costs me \$12.50 a month for a Flash Pass," said Stewart, who buys the monthly GET passes at a lower rate offered for disabled and elderly passengers.

Regular fares are 75 cents for customers age 6 or older and \$1.75 for a day pass. The day pass is good for unlimited rides.

Senior citizens, Medicare cardholders and people with disabilities can pay a reduced fare of 35 cents. Seniors and special riders -- customers with a certified disability -- can buy a day pass for 85 cents. Children age 5 and under ride free.

Southeast, east Bakersfield

The clock marked a few minutes past 1:15 p.m.

Sixty-five-year-old Samuel Orozco was running behind schedule to catch Bus No. 7 traveling through his east Bakersfield neighborhood, en route to Valley Plaza.

He didn't want to wait for a later bus so he took a chance. He grabbed his 75 cents bus fare and wooden stick holding 40 bags of cotton candy and bolted out the door.

Bus No. 7 was moving west down Brundage Lane toward the southern direction of Madison Street.

As the bus approached Madison Street, Orozco hurried to the stop and waved down the bus driver with a large wooden stick loaded with cotton candy that he would sell for \$1 a piece near South High School.

Driver Ron Jones acknowledged Orozco, by nodding his head as he turned the corner. And he stopped.

Relieved, Spanish-speaking Orozco smiled at Jones as he boarded the bus. His change clanked into the fare box as he made his way to one of the front gray-upholstered seats.

Like other southeast and east Bakersfield bus riders, Orozco knows No. 7, the Kern Medical Center bus route, well.

Almost daily, it takes him to different spots in metropolitan Bakersfield where he sells cotton candy to supplement his small fixed income.

He's been a bus rider for two years, and he's happy.

"I take it twice a day to different places," Orozco said.

Other riders use the busy No. 7 route to get around the older, more established neighborhood where stops include schools, Hispanic-themed stores and grocery marts, clinics and KMC.

The east and southeast parts of Bakersfield are the greatest ridership areas for GET. The Nos. 4, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 11 all meander through the east and southeast parts of town, full of riders.

"During the past several years, buses have been added on each of those routes in response to strong ridership," GET's Scott said. Budget constraints will likely keep service at its current level for a while, she said. Riders all have their own reasons for using GET.

"No. 5 will take you to Sizzler Restaurant," retired 65-year-old Nathan Walker said of one of his favorite places to eat.

Holding his senior bus pass, Walker said GET, well, gets him around.

"I use it to get around, pay my bills, a whole lot of stuff," Walker said.

On a recent day, Walker boarded No. 7 near Union Cemetery to go see his doctor on Niles Street.

"Everybody has to see the doctor in their old days," Walker said. "Sometimes the bus gets crowded and you can't find a seat on the bus. It beats walking. It takes you where you go."

Nine months pregnant, Miriam Perez rides the bus to visit her doctor at the East Bakersfield Community Health Center.

Recently, she found herself giving bus advice to new riders, Elizabeth Sanchez and Rosie Valdez, both Spanish speakers only.

They didn't know each other before boarding the bus.

But soon Perez was answering a slew of questions: Where should I get off to get to the Ranch Market? Where should I go to take the bus back? How far is Walgreens from Niles and Oswell streets where the bus stops? How long before the next bus comes around?

"I don't speak English," Sanchez said. "It's hard to communicate with the bus drivers when they can't talk to us (in Spanish). I would like it if there were more bilingual drivers."

For now, Perezza had to do.

Perezza, who can speak both languages, answered their questions.

A bus rider for five years now, Perezza said she often finds herself helping out Spanish-speaking riders who aren't quite sure if they're on the right bus.

"Like everyone else, I just learned how to take the bus."

With her \$25 monthly bus pass, Shirley Allen boards a series of different buses to get to Bakersfield College where she is studying business administration, or, on other days, to work as a part-time clerk at the Madison Apartments.

Recently, she started her odyssey at 9 a.m., switched to two other buses and finally got to BC where she dropped off some school papers.

"It's noon, and it's a long day already for me," said Allen on a recent bus ride.

Two more bus transfers and Allen was back at the Plaza transfer station ready to board No. 7 to start her day at work.

"Sometimes I fall asleep on the bus," Allen said.

But that can mean a missed stop, and more time. So Allen, the mother of three teen-agers, has made a point of making friends on the bus.

"I do get tired of catching the bus because it's too inconvenient," she said. "Still, I ride it everyday."

New Tracy power-plant proposal has some worried

By Kate Fowlie

Record Staff Writer

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Rumors of yet another power plant in the Tracy area have some residents nervous, and the Tracy City Council will consider opposing the project Tuesday.

It would be the fourth plant in an eight-mile radius, and some worry about the cumulative effects on the environment. One small facility is under construction on the edge of town, two much larger plants are in the works, and the fourth is a previously thought defunct Wellhead Electric project that may be revived.

Sacramento-based Wellhead had preliminary approval from the county to build a 49-megawatt plant on Lammers and Valpico roads but did not obtain a building permit within the 18-month limit. The approval was to have expired Oct. 28, but

Wellhead has applied for a year's extension. Company officials say they have no definite plans to build but wanted to keep their options open.

The San Joaquin County Planning Commission is scheduled to consider whether to extend the approval at its Jan. 9 meeting, said Chandler Martin of the county Community Development Department, which has the authority to approve the project. The California Energy Commission handles plants that are more than 50 megawatts.

The first time Wellhead went through the initial site-approval process, the project didn't make a ripple, Martin said. But this time, because of the other proposed plants in the area, people are protesting, and the commission will take their concerns into consideration, he said.

"We have been getting a lot of calls from people," Martin said.

Wellhead spokesman Gary Franzen said his company was surprised that the project was generating controversy.

"But I can understand why the people of Tracy might be concerned about this, given their recent experience with the other three plants," Franzen said.

Though small, Wellhead's plant would be next to GWF's Tracy Peaker Power Project, a 169-megawatt, natural-gas-fired facility under construction on South Schulte Road that is expected to be on line in April. Both are designed to generate power during periods of peak electricity demand.

The other two proposed power facilities are much larger: Calpine's 1,100-megawatt East Altamont Energy Center and FPL's 1,120-megawatt Tesla Power Plant. Both are planned between Tracy and Livermore, in Alameda County near the San Joaquin County line. [Their location raises concern, because the prevailing wind blows from the coast into the Valley and would carry the majority of any pollution toward Tracy.](#)

At the earliest, the plants would be on line in 2005. East Altamont is awaiting final approval from the Energy Commission, which could happen in the next few months. Tesla is under review and could be delayed by the company itself for financial reasons.

Finances also play a role in Wellhead's project, Franzen said. His company is waiting for a contract to provide energy for the state before deciding whether to build the Tracy plant, he said.

But community activist Bob Sarvey, who has opposed all the plants, said he thinks Wellhead plans to sell its county permit to another power company, something Franzen denied.

Sarvey predicts all four plants will be built and worries about the cumulative ill effects on air quality. He is so concerned about the impact on his asthmatic family that he is looking for a new place to live.

"Our air quality is getting bad even without all these power plants," Sarvey said. "We are out of here. This place is nuts. Nobody wants to stand up to the power companies," Sarvey said.

Tracy Mayor Dan Bilbrey said the city plans to keep tabs on the Wellhead project even though it has no jurisdiction over the project. The council was criticized for not being involved enough in the GWF project when it was first being considered by the Energy Commission.

"We are watching all these additional plants very closely. We are not going to let them get out in front of us like we did with GWF," Bilbrey said.

The mayor said it will be important to encourage the commission to insist Tracy receives money to pay for measures to offset the air pollution the Wellhead plant would create.

It is unusual to have so many projects being considered in one area, Energy Commission spokesman Chris Davis said. But the area makes sense for power plants, because the gas and transmission lines are already in place, Davis said.

As for the combined effects of GWF, East Altamont and Tesla, studies show that if all three were running, they would produce in one year the same amount of pollution created in three days by cars in the San Joaquin Valley.

Davis said the commission welcomes community input to come up with ways the energy companies can help offset their pollution.

"(Community members) help to shape the projects, but the bottom line is California still needs power plants," Davis said.

The City Council begins its meeting 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Tracy Community Center, 300 E. 10th St. The council will consider the Wellhead project during staff reports, which are presented near the end of the meeting.

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Lodi sewer-cleanup court fight wears on

By Jeff Hood

Lodi Bureau Chief

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LODI -- A courtroom may be where Lodi's federal lawsuit over underground pollution is being argued, but the real battle is in the sewers.

Lodi shares blame for the spread of industrial solvents in the central city's soil and groundwater, argue attorneys for Guild Cleaners, a dry-cleaning business being sued by the city for releasing hazardous chemicals. Guild's motivation for convincing U.S. District Judge Frank C. Damrell is simple: If he agrees, it could mean Lodi would have to help pay to clean up the toxic plume, with little hope of recovering the millions of dollars it has spent on legal and technical expenses.

In a recent court brief, Guild attorneys Lori Gualco and Stephen Meyer allege the city learned more than a decade ago that its sewers were leaking perchloroethylene, a dry-cleaning solvent, and still deferred maintaining and repairing pipes that it knew had major sections damaged or even missing.

But Randall A. Hays, Lodi's city attorney, said Guild's focus on Lodi sewers is an attempt to redirect the court's attention from a core issue: the discharge of toxic chemicals into a sewer system designed to carry biological waste to a treatment plant.

"It's certainly a question that's open for someone wanting to argue about it," Hays said, "but sewers that perform in their ordinary course were not designed to handle hazardous materials. The city didn't hold itself out as a transporter of hazardous materials. To hold the city responsible for their transgressions doesn't seem reasonable.

"It's like having General Motors responsible for the driver of a Chevrolet that runs over a pedestrian," he said.

Lodi is asking Damrell to order Guild Cleaners to investigate and remove downtown pollution. A ruling could come within a month.

Hays said U.S. District Judge David Levi, who, like Damrell, serves in the Sacramento-based Eastern California district, ruled in the Stockton Lincoln Properties case that San Joaquin County's sewer system wasn't responsible for perchloroethylene, or PCE, that leached from pipes into the ground.

Meyer, however, said that ruling pertained only to a short segment of sewer pipe, not a pattern of neglected maintenance covering miles of underground lines. For instance, the city appropriated \$3.1 million for 17 sewer-improvement projects between 1981 and 2002 but spent just \$960,170 on them.

City records requested by Guild's attorneys show the city knew industries were dumping chemical waste into the sewers by 1980, if not earlier, but didn't begin limiting PCE discharges until 1995, long after it was discovered in the soil and groundwater.

In 1987, a consultant investigated Lodi's sewer system and found it in serious disrepair. Black and Veatch made numerous recommendations for Lodi to improve the sewers' condition, most of which haven't been followed. For instance, the consultant recommended Lodi use smoke to check for leaks in 82,000 feet of sewer pipe each year. Lodi smoke-tested 2,602 feet in 1991 and just 1,624 feet from 1992 through 1994 before ending the practice.

The Black and Veatch report also recommended Lodi use a small video camera to check 41,000 feet of sewer lines each year, but the city has met that goal just twice since 1991.

Repairs were performed so infrequently, water/wastewater superintendent Fran Forkas testified in an Oct. 25 deposition, that records weren't normally kept.

Only this year has Lodi -- after raising sewer rates a compounded 82 percent -- begun a major renovation, which Forkas testified is a result of the 1987 report.

"It took us (15) years to get the funding to start it and a few councilmen to raise enough hell to get started on the project," Forkas said during the deposition, later agreeing with Meyer's statement that the City Council didn't have the "political will" to raise sewer rates earlier to pay for repairs.

Hays said city officials used their best judgment on how to spend limited public funds and that Lodi wasn't obligated to follow recommendations in the 1987 report.

If Damrell declines Lodi's request to issue a cleanup order against Guild, state environmental agencies may step in and force the work to begin, according to a Nov. 7 letter to the judge from Nicholas Stern, deputy attorney general for the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

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S.J. tackles MTBE leak near Manteca homes

By Steve Hartsoe

Manteca Bureau Chief

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MANTECA -- The yellowish, 6-foot torpedolike tubes belted together in pairs have become part of the landscape on residential properties along North Airport Way, just north of West Yosemite Avenue.

Resident Trevia Oliver doesn't mind them at all. At least now she doesn't have to fear a potentially cancerous chemical in her water, she says.

"It's alright with me. I don't have no complaints."

Oliver lives at one of 11 residences here with wells hooked up to the water-treatment system the county is using to help prevent the gasoline additive MTBE from entering domestic water supplies.

Just to the south, at the intersection of Yosemite Avenue and Airport Way, authorities in 1998 discovered what has been dubbed the largest MTBE well-contamination site in San Joaquin County. The plume extended north of the property, as wide as a football field and as long as four.

The gasoline additive was discovered when gasoline-storage tanks were removed from a service station on the southeast corner of the intersection, which is on county property.

Twelve of 60 private wells in that area were affected.

MTBE, or methyl tertiary butyl ether, was added to gasoline statewide to reduce air pollution. It has been linked to cancer in animal studies and is being phased out.

Officials from the county Health Care Services Agency and residents at the site said they don't know of any health problems attributable to the plume. But others living in the affected neighborhood claim some residents have become sick and believe it's from the gas additive.

"It's not something we've found," said Troylene Sayler, a spokeswoman for the agency.

Residents initially were forced to rely on bottled water. Then, officials from the county in fall 2000 hooked up properties to 1,000-gallon tanks positioned in residents' yards. Manteca provided water for the tanks from city fire hydrants.

Officials say it's a yearslong process to clean up the mess and find a long-term water source for residents. The city considered annexing the acreage and hooking residents up to city water but found it too expensive, said Laurie Cotulla, environmental-health program manager with the county.

The latest treatment device treats the water between the well and residence, she said. It appears to be working.

"So far, they haven't had any detections" of MTBE in well water, she said.

Monitoring and treatment at the source is ongoing.

"They are still recovering a lot of product -- gasoline with MTBE," Cotulla said. She noted that the well serving the station, plus an auto-repair shop and vehicle-rental office at the site, is safe and has "never been impacted" by the MTBE plume.

Officials hope both the removal process, which involves injecting air into the affected water that causes MTBE to vaporize before extraction and treatment at residential wells reigns in the plume and its threat to public health.

"The goal is the cleanup will cause the plume to shrink and pull it back to the site," Cotulla said.

She could not confirm last week how much the plume has shrunk.

Frank Guinta, who once owned the property where the MTBE is believed to have originated, is fronting the cleanup costs and has spent several hundred thousand dollars.

His costs can be reimbursed by the state, Cotulla said.

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