

Modesto set to wheel 'n' deal

Modesto Bee
Friday, May 14
Bee Staff reports

The city of Modesto wants people to leave their cars at home and use pedal power to get to work May 20.

The city's Rideshare program and several organizations are behind Bike to Work Day. People are invited to make their own route to downtown, or join police-escorted groups starting from 6:30 to 7 a.m.

Everyone who rides is invited for a free continental breakfast in the plaza outside Tenth Street Place, and the first 125 riders will receive T-shirts and bicycle-related items. The celebration is scheduled to run until 8:30 a.m.

Organizers said police escorts, on bicycles, will meet up with other riders at various points.

The event comes during California Bike Commute Week, which promotes safe bicycling as transportation to and from work. Among the benefits, organizers say, is less traffic congestion and better air quality.

Air Pollution Causes Gene Damage in Mice

L.A. Times
From Times Staff and Wire Reports
May 15, 2004

Sooty air pollution can cause genetic damage in mice that can be passed along to offspring, Canadian researchers reported in this week's issue of the journal Science.

The team from Ontario's McMaster University found that the culprit was airborne particulate matter, better known as soot, and was concerned that it could produce the same damage in humans.

The specific DNA changes observed in sperm aren't linked to disease, but they're similar to a type of damage that is. The researchers said more study was needed to see whether the damage was a marker for potential health problems and whether pollution-spurred, disease-causing mutations could be inherited too.

Revised budget gets mixed Valley reviews

Local lawmakers find reasons to criticize, praise governor's plan.

By Jennifer M. Fitzenberger
Bee Capitol Bureau
(Updated Friday, May 14, 2004, 9:44 AM)

SACRAMENTO -- Valley lawmakers found hope and disappointment in Gov. Schwarzenegger's revised budget proposal released Thursday.

Republicans said deals Schwarzenegger made with education leaders and local governments -- which are reflected in the proposal -- hopefully will lead the Legislature to quickly approve the budget.

But Democrats questioned nuances of the deals and deplored a proposal they said is riddled with revenue uncertainties.

Sen. Dean Florez, a Shafter Democrat, said he's concerned the governor is counting on \$300 million from prison guard negotiations and \$500 million from American Indian gambling deals -- all of which are not final.

"I would only hope that people recognize there is a high amount of uncertainty and borrowing," said Florez, adding that he hopes Schwarzenegger's revenue assumptions are correct. Florez said he's also worried about Schwarzenegger's strong wish to pass the budget on time. Hurrying the process, Florez said, could lead to future problems.

"The most important thing is this budget adds up and is not based on smoke and mirrors," Florez said. "I want the governor to be right."

But Florez said he's happy Schwarzenegger didn't cut air-quality programs, is putting millions of dollars toward programs that combat teen pregnancy and has pledged to fund the University of California at Merced.

The governor also proposes to delay the opening of Coalinga State Hospital by one month to September 2005 and reduce the number of beds to 200 from 575. The change would save the state \$9.5 million.

Originally, the hospital was facing a year delay. "It allows our progress to continue forward," Florez said.

Democratic Assembly Member Sarah Reyes of Fresno said she is worried that smaller Valley cities won't be able to weather cuts agreed to by larger local governments.

Cities and counties agreed to \$2.6 billion in cuts over the next two fiscal years in exchange for Schwarzenegger's support of a proposed constitutional amendment that would protect their coffers in the future.

"That could be very devastating" to smaller cities, Reyes said.

But Reyes said she was glad Schwarzenegger reversed some health and human services cuts and retained funding for UC Merced.

Republican Sen. Chuck Poochigian of Fresno said he's encouraged by the governor's budget revision.

"Clearly, it seems that some very big pieces of the budget puzzle are in place," Poochigian said, referring to deals Schwarzenegger has struck in recent weeks with K-12 representatives, higher-education leaders and local governments.

Poochigian said he looks forward to scrutinizing education funding, specifically categorical program reforms: "I am interested in delving in and getting a full understanding of how that is going to work under his proposal."

Sen. Jeff Denham, a Merced Republican, said he was pleased to see that Schwarzenegger is counting on \$50 million from selling unnecessary state property. Denham and Sen. Jim Battin, a Palm Desert Republican, sponsored a 10-bill state asset reform package this year.

Denham said the state could save more than \$250 million by selling unused property.

[Fresno Bee commentary, May 16, 2004:](#)

Madera County sees riches

By Bill McEwen

(Updated Sunday, May 16, 2004, 6:50 AM)

My calendar says it's 2004, but in Madera County it might as well be 1854.

The gold rush is on. Heaven help anyone in the way.

Especially Fresno County.

There is profit to be made in the flatlands of mostly undeveloped Madera County, and its Board of Supervisors can hardly wait to smear a cowchip in the face of its bigger neighbor.

Madera's supervisors -- Frank Bigelow, Vern Moss, Ronn Dominici, John V. Silva and Gary Gilbert -- can be as cantankerous as a rank bull with frostbite. Moreover, they get double mean when opponents of projects in their county ask questions about air, water, traffic and roads. Understand: This board doesn't worry much about fancy environmental stuff. That's for sissies.

If told they had cancer, these guys would slap a pinch of Skoal next to their gums. Then they'd tell cancer to jump into the San Joaquin River and be sure to wash up on the Fresno side.

To say there's a bit of history between Madera and Fresno would be an understatement. What is now Madera County was part of Fresno County until 1893. It's been Hatfields vs. McCoys since.

"All we ask is to give us an opportunity as free people inhabiting a territory equal to the state of Delaware to experience the right of self-government," said lawyer William M. Conley, arguing for secession.

In a sign of things to come, Madera broke loose. But the county didn't build a courthouse until 1901. A century later, the county would approve the construction of a regional children's hospital without sufficient fire protection.

This approve-now, worry-later approach is a perfect fit for developers, who can't wait to break out the stucco and Spanish roof tiles -- today's version of silver and gold.

Last week the supervisors approved the first neighborhood in River Ranch Estates, a planned community that aims to plant 4,300 homes along the San Joaquin below Friant Dam.

In the pipeline: The Village of Gateway, which would replace 2,400 acres of orchards with 6,400 homes west of Highway 41 over the next 20 years.

This is a Castle & Cooke project. Again, think Silver & Gold. The company has the will, might and know-how to trample all obstacles. Not that the supervisors will raise many.

Way, way down the road: Rio Mesa, which sounds like a John Wayne movie and wants to be Clovis II.

There are dozens of reasons for Madera to look harder at allowing extensive development along the river and the Highway 41 corridor.

River Ranch Estates could draw down Fresno's water table, raise air pollution levels and harm the good work that has been done on the San Joaquin River Parkway.

The fact the project is opposed by farmers and environmentalists -- when was the last time that happened? -- should be a tip-off more scrutiny is needed.

Finally, there's the need for regional planning. You can bet that as soon as large-scale tracts -- with accompanying strip malls -- go up in Madera, Fresno and Clovis will answer by redrawing their general plans and expanding their boundaries. Sprawl begets sprawl.

Think the Madera board cares?

Naw, the county has been waiting 111 years for this.

[Merced Sun-Star opinion, May 14, 2004:](#)

Truckway proposal holds promise

Amid state's financial woes, getting big rigs off highways could ease traffic, road repair costs

Last Updated: May 14, 2004, 08:55:20 AM PDT

Sometimes hard times can force useful innovations that would not have come about during good times. California's transportation sector is facing very hard times indeed. Traditional road funding sources have been drained to pay the state's day-to-day bills. Money is so short, some highway projects will have to be shut down.

Take a look at Highway 99, for example. Merced's main link with the outside world is a crumbling mess, with ever-increasing traffic making the already overstressed road crumble even faster.

In the face of the funding crisis, Southern California transportation planners are proposing a potentially useful innovation. They want to tap private funds to build dedicated toll roads for trucks -- a whole new transportation mode that planners have dubbed "truckways." Imagine Highway 99 without the trucks -- what a different stretch of roadway it would be.

This is more than a theoretical concept. The six-county Southern California Association of Governments has adopted a regional transportation plan that would include the nation's first truckway. The truckway would run 142 miles from the Los Angeles port of San Pedro east to Barstow along existing freeway routes that now carry some of the highest volume of truck traffic in the nation. It would consist of four lanes, two going in each direction, and cost \$16.5 billion.

Under the plan, tax-exempt revenue bonds would be issued to finance construction of special toll lanes exclusively for trucks. Truck fees ranging anywhere from 38 cents to 80 cents a mile would pay off the bonds and finance maintenance and operation of the dedicated truck lanes that would run adjacent to, but separated by physical barriers from, the freeway.

Not only would moving trucks onto their own lanes free up road space in the other lanes for cars, but cars also would benefit from not having to maneuver around behemoth trucks that now clog freeways.

The trucking industry has opposed tolls in the past. The south state plan assumes industry officials would be open to a proposal that would allow truckers to increase productivity by introducing long doubles and triple trailers into California for the first time.

Other Western states, including Nevada and Oregon, allow long trucks now. California has wisely barred them because of safety considerations and the wear and tear heavier and longer trucks have on roadbeds. If the trucks were limited to special heavy-duty truckways separated by barriers from other traffic, the idea may make fiscal and safety sense.

Proponents will likely meet with opposition from some elements within the trucking industry, and from railroads that compete with truckers. They must overcome skepticism from environmentalists concerned about the land use and air pollution implications of truckways, and labor organizations concerned about job losses. They must gain the approval of Congress and the state Legislature. Finally, they must convince Wall Street that the idea makes economic sense.

That's going to take a long time, and a Southern California truckway won't necessarily fix Central Valley road problems, unless some of the highway funds that would have gone south are diverted here.

It is far too early to give the proposal wholehearted support. Given the hurdles, truckways may never be built in California. Still, hard times mean that at least they will be given serious consideration and analysis for the first time. With the status quo clearly unsustainable, that is progress.

[Saturday, May 16, Modesto Bee, Letters to the Editor](#)

Lions aren't the ones encroaching

Two quick comments about Jeff Jardine's column, "Mountain lions are here; it's time to rein them in" (May 6): It's true that there is a state mandate to build more homes in the valley. However, what brought that mandate about is the well-funded real estate and builders lobby in Sacramento. Tell the whole story, please! A lot of local taxpayers are contacting their local and state officials demanding a growth ban.

The mountain lions and other wildlife were here first, including migratory birds. This is what happens when overpopulation is allowed to occur in a geographical area that has reached its carrying capacity. Air quality, water quality and, yes, even wildlife's quality of life will suffer, sometimes even into extinction.

DOUGLAS CLAY

Modesto

[Friday, May 14, Modesto Bee, Editorial](#)

Bush EPA clearing air with rules governing off-road diesel engines

Environmentalists regularly and justifiably pummel the Bush administration for policies that have favored polluters over the environment and public health. But this week, some of the president's harshest critics find themselves in unfamiliar territory.

They are heaping praise on the Bush Environmental Protection Agency for new rules that will slap tough controls on some of the dirtiest and most persistent sources of air pollution in the country -- diesel engines that power farm and construction equipment and vehicles.

The accolades are well-deserved. As cars have gotten progressively cleaner, off-road engines powered with diesel have continued to belch black smoke that contains the same high levels of soot and smog-forming chemicals as in the 1960s. For the first time, the Bush EPA's rules will impose emission standards on tractors, graders, combines, water pumps and other equipment and vehicles that operate off road.

To work effectively, new technology to control engine emissions requires low-sulfur diesel. So the new rules first will require oil companies to produce diesel with 99 percent less sulfur. As more low-sulfur diesel is made available, engine-emission standards will be tightened. The cleaner diesel and matching emission controls will be phased in over the next 11 years.

Ultimately, these rules will prevent premature deaths, heart attacks and visits to the emergency room by children with asthma.

The EPA has announced plans to go even further. The agency says it will begin the process to start controlling emissions from locomotives and ships by 2011. Railroads and marine engines are among the biggest remaining unregulated sources of pollution.

EPA officials consulted with environmentalists, state air regulators and health officials as well as leaders of polluting industry before issuing its new diesel rules. The result is a reasonable set of regulations that will help the nation breathe easier.

[Saturday, May 15, Modesto Bee, Editorial](#)

Hundreds of homes are proposed east of the Hammett Road interchange, just south of the Stanislaus River, in a project called River Ranch. We'll learn more about it late this summer, when the draft environmental impact report is expected.

Coincidentally, a proposed development with almost the same name, River Ranch Estates, is causing all sorts of concern in Madera County and neighboring Fresno.

The issues that emerge surrounding the two River Ranches are the same as those associated with every large valley project: traffic, air quality, water and how to provide services such as police and fire protection.

Sunday, May 16, Modesto Bee, Editorial

Keep Kaiser Moving

From the day plans were unveiled in December 2002, the Kaiser Permanente hospital proposed for north Modesto has stood out as a bright prospect for our lackluster economy. The medical center will serve thousands of Kaiser members in our area and provide hundreds of good-paying and benefited jobs.

Right now, though, the project is in the environmental review process, a stage where everyone's job is to point out negatives.

A consultant hired by the city prepared a 500-page environmental impact report. Caltrans, [the air pollution control district](#), Stanislaus County and 15 other agencies and individuals now have responded to the draft EIR, mostly with criticisms.

To no one's surprise, traffic is by far the biggest worry, trailed by such concerns as noise and the availability of water.

But for all of the legitimate concerns raised, and there are some, we're convinced the Kaiser medical campus still comes out big on the plus side of the community balance sheet.

While negotiating firmly to make sure that it pays its fair share of development costs, community leaders need to make sure they do not discourage -- or worse, drive away -- Kaiser, the kind of employer and corporate citizen that our community has spent years and hundreds of thousands dollars trying to lure.

There's no doubt the vehicles driven by Kaiser patients and employees will exacerbate the congestion already plaguing the area east of Highway 99, between Pelandale and Kiernan avenues. But Kaiser cannot be expected to solve all the problems that have accumulated over 10 to 15 years.

What's Kaiser's fair share? We can't put a number on it, but we know the health plan has already committed to a substantial amount. According to Terry Lightfoot, public affairs manager for Modesto and Stockton, Kaiser has agreed to pay more than \$15 million in the next three years and \$23 million over the next 10 years in traffic improvements and fees to the city and county.

Kaiser joined local leaders in lobbying for improvements to Highway 219, also known as Kiernan Avenue, which will be a key route between the hospital and Highway 99.

We disagree with a Caltrans suggestion that Modesto, as the lead agency for the Kaiser project, inherits responsibility for coordinating traffic improvements to the whole area between Pelandale and Kiernan. Much of that land is in the county and much of the traffic there is a result of development approved by the Board of Supervisors. This is but one more area where city and county leaders need to work together.

Cooperation will be essential in many steps of the Kaiser project. The 49-acre hospital site along Dale Road is in the county but will be annexed to the city before construction starts, meaning the two entities have much work to do together.

In their response to the EIR, county officials raised a number of concerns about the medical campus, several of which have irritated city and Kaiser officials and at least a couple of which deserve special mention.

For example, the county wants to punch Ladd Road through from its current end at Stoddard Avenue on to the Hammett Road interchange. It suggests Kaiser will contribute to traffic on Ladd and should help pay for Ladd improvements. We think the Ladd Road extension has much more to do with the county's growth plans for Salida than it does the hospital.

The county should be commended, however, for bringing up an important and sensitive social issue -- the challenges and costs of providing health care to the poor. Supervisors are concerned that Kaiser, a members-only plan, won't serve Medi-Cal patients and those with no insurance coverage, in essence leaving county health clinics and existing hospitals with the continuing burden of serving the poor. Another possibility is that Kaiser will sign up healthier, employed residents as its patients, leaving a greater number of poor and uninsured to the other providers.

Like all not-for-profit hospitals, Kaiser must contribute to the communities in which it operates and, like all hospitals, it must treat any seriously injured or sick person who shows up in its emergency department. But not everyone realizes that.

According to the most recent Community Benefit Plans filed with the state, Kaiser's community contributions in the Modesto-Stockton area totaled \$1.9 million for 2002. Of that, \$631,817 was for "medical care services for

vulnerable populations," including \$4,105 for patients with no coverage at all and \$627,000 in unreimbursed costs for patients with Medi-Cal and other plans.

By contrast, for 2002, Memorial Medical Center reported almost \$48 million in medical services to the same population, including \$2.4 million to people with no insurance coverage.

The comparisons are not entirely fair because Kaiser doesn't yet have a local hospital, but the numbers suggest why charity and Medi-Cal care are significant concerns.

But this isn't just about charity. It's also about industry competition. Kaiser, the nation's largest health plan, wants to build a hospital that will compete against Memorial, a not-for-profit that is affiliated with the highly competitive Sutter Health network, and Doctors Medical Center, which is part of privately owned Tenet Healthcare Corp. and is among the state's most profitable hospitals.

One paragraph in the county's comments hints at the competition issues. In it, the county complains that Kaiser will pay higher wages, forcing local employers to do the same. Most residents, we think, wouldn't consider that a negative impact.

While these competition issues haven't surfaced in public debate, we expect they eventually will. And we know decision makers are hearing privately from hospital executives.

Kaiser, which wants to open the campus in late 2007, would like to start construction by the end of summer. We don't think that's realistic, given the many legal steps required and the need for public hearings and review along the way. But the time line should only have to change by weeks and months, not years.

In making its case for the Modesto hospital, Kaiser retained a consultant whose economic impact study suggests the hospital will, by 2008, employ 2,630 people and pay \$147 million in wages, with a spinoff effect throughout the community.

Even if those numbers drop, in light of Kaiser's recent purchase of St. Dominic's Hospital in Manteca, they are impressive and appealing.

This massive project deserves to move through the approval process with the greatest deliberation and without unnecessary stalling.

[Monday, May 17, Modesto Bee, Editorial](#)

Toll roads for trucks worth consideration

Sometimes hard times can force useful innovations that would not have come about during good times.

California's transportation sector is facing very hard times indeed. Traditional road funding sources have been drained to pay the state's day-to-day bills. Money is so short, some highway projects will have to be shut down.

In the face of the funding crisis, Southern California transportation planners are proposing a potentially useful innovation. They want to tap private funds to build dedicated toll roads for trucks -- a whole new transportation mode that planners have dubbed "truckways."

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Not only would moving trucks onto their own lanes free road space on the other lanes for cars, but also cars would benefit from not having to maneuver around behemoth trucks.

There will be opposition to truckways, from within the trucking industry and from railroads, the competition. Environmentalists will be concerned about the land use and air pollution implications and labor organizations concerned about job losses. Proponents will need the approval of Congress and the state Legislature. Finally, they must convince Wall Street that the idea makes economic sense.

It is far too early to give the proposal wholehearted support. Given the hurdles, truckways may never be built in California. Still, hard times mean that at least they will be given serious consideration and analysis for the first time. That is good.