

## **Fight of his young life**

### **Asthma, air pollution bane of Valley children**

By Michael G. Mooney, staff writer

Modesto Bee, Monday, May 23, 2005

Ayotli's face turned red as a choking cough forced the little boy to gasp for every breath.

Destiny Álvarez said her 5-year-old son has had to endure such a coughing fit only a "couple of times," but that doesn't make it any less frightening.

Alvárez said Ayotli (an Aztec-derived name meaning "messenger from the heavens of the heart") was approaching his first birthday when the problem began.

"He was coughing a lot," she said. "The doctors thought he just had a cough from a cold. That was the worst time, when he was between 12 and 18 months."

Alvárez said it took about six months and repeated visits to doctors before her son finally was diagnosed as asthmatic.

"It was pretty frustrating," she said. "As a young mother, you depend on the advice and expertise a doctor provides."

Alvárez said her mother, who was studying to be a respiratory therapist at the time, also tried to convince the doctors but met with the same result.

"We told them we thought it was asthma; that we had asthma in the family," said Destiny Alvárez. "But they wouldn't listen to us."

Dr. George Bensch, a pediatrician and partner in the Stockton-based Allergy, Immunology and Asthma Medical Group, said the experience of the Alvárezes was not unusual.

Asthma, he said, often is underdiagnosed and not properly treated.

Today, Alvárez is teaching her son how to use medicines such as albuterol and Flovent inhalers. Near summer's end, he will begin kindergarten at Modesto's Wilson Elementary School.

Wilson, like other schools throughout Stanislaus County, will begin flying "air pollution" flags this fall.

Flags of four colors will be used — green for healthy air; yellow, moderate air; orange, poor air quality for sensitive groups, which includes people like Ayotli with asthma, diabetes or cardiovascular disease; and red, unhealthy air.

When air conditions are in the orange and red areas, people are advised to stay indoors. That could mean no outdoor recess or physical education during school on those days.

Alvárez is well-acquainted with asthma and asthma medications. The 25-year-old Modesto native said she developed the respiratory ailment when she was 10 years old.

"It happened as I became more active in sports and things," she said. "I think it's caused by the bad air."

Despite her own experiences, Alvárez said it still was frightening to watch her young son's face turn red as he struggled to catch a breath.

### **Nights were the hardest**

In her son's case, Alvárez said "little attacks" began in the middle of the night.

"He would start coughing after he fell asleep," she said. "I would have to prop him up on pillows."

But, she said, sometimes the coughing would continue.

"Sometimes, I would take him into a hot shower; anything to help him breathe."

Alvárez said it was difficult time — one in which she did not get much sleep. On some nights, she might need to get up with the boy only once. Other times, she would go to his room several times during the night.

And, she said, there were times when she would stay awake all night, trying to comfort the boy and ease his persistent wheezing and coughing.

It was almost a relief, she said, when her son's asthma finally was diagnosed. "At least we knew what it was."

Last month, the American Lung Association said children in the Northern San Joaquin Valley pay a high price for the region's inability to clear its air of pollution.

In its "State of the Air 2005" report, the Lung Association gave failing grades to Stanislaus, Merced, Tuolumne, San Joaquin and Calaveras counties.

The report listed Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin among those counties having the most severely polluted air in the nation for smog and particle pollution.

As a result, the study said valley children endure:

**Diminished lung capacity.**

Increased susceptibility to asthma and many other chronic respiratory diseases.

The loss of months or even years from their expected life spans.

"It's a serious problem," Bensch said, "but I don't know what we're going to do about it."

He said that mixing pollutants like ozone and particulate matter with the valley's naturally occurring molds, pollens and other allergens have combined to form a sort of super pollution.

"The mix is lethal," said Bensch, who has lived and worked in the Northern San Joaquin Valley for 35 years and has offices in Lodi, Modesto and Stockton. "(But) in this case, one and one does not equal two; it's more like four or five. And it gets worse the farther south you go."

Alvárez said her son is 10 percent smaller than the average child his age. "I think it's because of his asthma."

She said she cannot buy stuffed animals for her son because they seem to prompt asthma attacks. Such toys attract dust mites, microscopic organisms that often make breathing and allergy problems worse.

**Summer worst season**

While Ayotli seems to be improving, he's by no means out of the woods.

Alvárez said her son's asthma worsens during the summer. Part of the boy's morning ritual, she said, is Claratin antihistamine, followed by one medicine aimed at helping him breathe easier and another that helps prevent asthma attacks.

"I give him the inhalers as he needs them, at least once a day" she said. "He gets two puffs of albuterol followed by two puffs of Flovent."

As the temperatures get hotter and the air grows dirtier, Alvárez said Ayotli will need inhalers more frequently, as many as three times on some days.

"I give him (the inhalers) whenever he's wheezing or having trouble getting enough air," she said.

**Air more catalyst than cause**

As long as people continue to turn to the Central valley for affordable housing, Bensch said he doesn't see that scenario changing. "There's no way out."

Though the valley's filthy air certainly makes it more difficult for people with respiratory or heart ailments, Bensch said, air pollution by itself is not necessarily the cause of those problems.

That's especially true, he said, with asthma.

"It's genetic disease," Bensch said. "It gets passed along in families. If you have the wrong genes and the right environmental factors, nobody can deny (air pollution) makes asthma worse."

Bensch said there are numerous studies that support that contention.

That doesn't mean, he continued, that everyone breathing the valley's air will end up with asthma or some other type of respiratory illness.

"There's a wide variability here," Bensch said. "Don't tar everybody with the same brush here. (But) it can be deadly for those with the right risk factors."

Last month, during a briefing with reporters, Dr. John Balmes also insisted that the health risks associated with air pollution are very real.

Balmes is a pulmonary physician and professor of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco. He pointed to oil refineries, diesel exhaust from trucks and buses, the family car and agricultural burning as among the state's biggest sources of particle pollution, as well as contributing key raw ingredients to ozone pollution.

Bensch, however, was not willing to blame agricultural burning or other farming and-or ranching practices as significant sources of valley air pollution.

"Everybody blames the poor farmers for all this," he said, "but farming didn't create this problem. It may have helped keep it out of here for a number of years" by holding down the valley's population.

Instead, according to Bensch, it's the area's rapid population growth and urban-style development that are the key ingredients in the valley's air pollution equation.

In fairness to builders and developers, Bensch added, however, "as all this growth and urbanization was coming here, we really didn't have the (air pollution data)that we do now."

### **No where without pollution**

Alvárez also worries about growth and the air pollution it appears to have spawned.

She's grateful that her son's asthma doesn't seem as bad during the winter. She's also hopeful that one day, he too, will "outgrow" his asthma as she seems to have done.

But there's no guarantee.

Alvárez said that her own condition seems to have worsened in the past year or so.

"I'm probably going to have to go out and get an inhaler for myself," she said.

And even moving away from the valley, Bensch said, may not solve the problem for people with asthma and other respiratory diseases.

Air pollution, he said, is everywhere — the desert, the mountains. The choice is more a matter of how much dirty air are you willing to live with and what type of pollutants you can best tolerate.

"You can run," Bensch said, "but there's no place to hide."

### **The need for speed**

By SCOTT PESZNECKER

MERCED SUN-STAR

Published in the Modesto Bee, May 23, 2005

On a swath of farmland northeast of Atwater, the hum of engines is much rarer than the sound of wind blowing through almond trees.

Maybe not for long.

Riverside Motorsports Park, LLC, wants to build a massive, eight-track race park on a former 1,187-acre almond farm adjacent to Castle Airport Aviation and Development Center.

Riverside officials say they plan to spend about \$200 million — not including environmental mitigation — to create an entertainment destination for racers and fans from all over the country. Organizers say their events could draw a maximum audience of 50,000 a few times a year, but crowds would more frequently hover around 10,000.

They say they want a world-class track that can host events with NASCAR, NHRA, the Indy Racing League, Champ Car World Series and any of the other 40 national racing sanctioning bodies. They also see a place for summer concerts, a thriving business park, automotive schools and an educational relationship with engineering students at the University of California, Merced.

But opponents have a different vision: more traffic, pollution and noise. They worry about how the sounds of race cars, trucks, motorcycles and go-karts and pollution will affect public health, and how the developers can make up for the farmland the raceway would destroy.

Merced County Supervisor Mike Nelson, whose district covers the southern portion of the project site, calls the raceway a polarizing issue.

"On one hand, this could bring a lot of jobs, not only to the Castle area but to the whole county," Nelson said. "On the other hand, you've got what could be considered major environmental challenges.

"So the question will be: Is RMP able to mitigate for those environmental challenges?"

### **Waiting for the green light**

Racetrack CEO John Condren spent decades behind the wheel of a race car.

As an amateur racer in 1972, Condren spent most of his time running laps at Riverside International Raceway in Riverside, a Southern California park he called his home court.

Now Condren wants to bring an updated version of that track to Merced County. He based the plans for his eight-track park on the original blueprints for Riverside International Raceway, which was razed in the late 1980s to make way for houses and a shopping mall.

Condren declined a request for a personal profile. However, Riverside's Web site does provide some information: He lives in Morgan Hill, and his most recent professional positions include being the founding partner and president of 3Sixty Market View, Inc., a multi-million dollar, high-technology marketing consulting firm.

He served as director of worldwide marketing for Cadence Design Systems and was vice-president and chief marketing officer for RS Ltd., a semiconductor technology company based in Glenrothes, Scotland. He has founded software development firms, and has been involved in marketing at several corporations, including working as a national sales manager for Motorola/P2A.

Though Riverside officials will not disclose who is backing their private business venture, the Web site says the plan has the "strong support of various equity investment partners."

Condren says the Riverside idea formed in 1999 after a sweltering race in Las Vegas, and he began looking for property in California. He's explored a few different sites, but bought the Merced County land in 2003 and has been moving forward with plans here since.

The location is right, Riverside organizers say, for a variety of reasons: Merced County is centrally located between major population centers; the property organizers want to build on is near an airport where people can land their private aircraft; Highway 99 and Interstate 5 provide good access for people who would want to attend races here; there are relatively few neighbors; and the area needs an entertainment draw.

With racetracks for automobiles, trucks, motorcycles and go-karts, Riverside could put the county on the racing world's map, Condren said.

Condren says Riverside will funnel an estimated \$300 million a year into the local economy by providing jobs for locals and spending opportunities for tourists, both at the park and surrounding businesses such as hotels and restaurants.

Park organizers estimate their project would generate about 650 jobs, including 150 full-time employees and 500 seasonal workers. Officials also say more than 50 motorsports-related businesses could open at the raceway, employing at least 500 more people.

As proposed, the racepark would also include RV facilities, picnic areas, food courts, family restaurants, video and game arcades, playgrounds and restrooms.

Developers first submitted their project proposal to the Merced County Planning Department in April 2003. They bought the land through a bankruptcy court proceeding in March 2003 from New York-based Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. and Minnesota-based US Bank NA, which had been holding the property in foreclosure.

The land Riverside now owns was once part of the Morimoto family's farm holdings. The Morimotos had once planned an industrial park for the property.

Riverside organizers will not disclose how much they paid for the property, but the deal included assuming some of the Morimotos' bank notes. Merced County Supervisor Deidre Kelsey said she thought the sale was in the \$12 million neighborhood. County property records show that the land was sold in several parcels and the assessed value adds up to about \$9 million.

Riverside officials say they want to be up and running by the beginning of the racing season in spring 2007.

They say the raceway already has the support of thousands of county residents.

Still, Condren said, he wants to satisfy critics by mitigating as many of the project's environmental impacts as possible.

As an example, he points out that Riverside will provide groundwater recharge basins in four small lakes at the park that could help local communities preserve their resources.

"I want something that's going to work for the community, I want something that's beneficial," Condren said. "A beneficial project can't have negative impacts."

### **Waving the caution flag**

Some county residents say there's no way to avoid major environmental drawbacks in creating a motorsports park on a once-tranquil farm.

At the forefront, Citizens Against the Raceway is a grass roots, loose-knit group of people who have mobilized to halt the project, arguing it would clog roads and pollute the air.

"They're definitely intending to attract people from outside the county on this," said Lisa Kayser-Grant, a group member. "What that brings with it are cars, trucks, exhaust and air pollution."

Another Citizens Against the Raceway member, longtime Merced resident Ace Bowman, said the project's environmental impacts would outweigh its economic benefits.

"Instead of just letting some pollution from (the Bay Area) blow over, why not just bring it here?" Bowman said. "I am not much in favor of the raceway. I never was really wildly enthused."

The park also could get resistance from two popular racetracks, one at the Merced County Fairgrounds and the other in Chowchilla, but their directors did not return calls seeking comment.

Merced County Planning Director Bill Nicholson said he expects Riverside to face opposition throughout the planning process.

Even if county supervisors eventually sign off on the raceway, Nicholson expects the final approval will come from a judge.

"This project will be sued," he said. "We have no doubt."

Other similarly large projects have drawn a number of lawsuits recently. The Merced County Farm Bureau, for example, is suing Atwater to block a 1,600-home subdivision. Another county environmental group headed by Lydia Miller, director of the San Joaquin Raptor Rescue Center, has launched eight lawsuits against local agencies in the past two years, including one to stop a planned community adjacent to the University of California, Merced.

Supervisors shared similar thoughts about the project's future.

"There have been less significant projects the county has been sued upon, so it would not surprise me if there was a suit, no matter what the action," Merced County Board of Supervisors Chairman Jerry O'Banion said.

Merced County Farm Bureau Director Diana Westmoreland Pedrozo said her agency has several concerns about the project, such as how it will affect the region's water supply. She also worries about losing farmland as more of the county is developed.

"We can no longer act like you can blink away the conversion of thousands and thousands of acres," Westmoreland Pedrozo said.

Les McCabe, a member of the Farm Bureau's board of directors, said his board will wait until it sees environmental studies before it discusses what to do if the project is approved.

Tension over the project has already flared up in public.

Last November, a forum sponsored by Citizens Against the Raceway turned into a shouting match after dozens of racetrack supporters objected that their side was not being heard. About three dozen people stormed out of that meeting in protest after being told supporters could only ask questions by writing them down on 3-by-5 cards.

And earlier this year, county planners and racetrack opponents disputed several claims in a letter Condren sent to supporters and investors. The letter, which Condren said was never meant for public viewing, claimed the project already had the support of four of five county supervisors — a contention supervisors denied during a February board meeting.

Riverside officials did not want to comment about the possibility of being sued.

Condren said he understands why people have concerns about his project.

However, he said, people should wait until the park's environmental impact report is released before drawing conclusions.

"They're talking about the right stuff," Condren said about Riverside's critics. "They're just not basing any of it on fact."

### **The final laps**

The report is coming.

Anytime now, Riverside's developers expect their project's environmental impact report to be ready for public review. Impact reports, required by state law for many large developments, examine how projects would affect their surroundings, both in the short and long terms.

Once the report is released, the public will have 45 days to comment on the document, and those comments will be addressed in a revised, final report that could be finished later this year.

The project would then go before the Merced County Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors for its final approvals.

Until the impact report is ready, though, supervisors are reluctant to take a stance.

Supervisor Kelsey provided the only criticism from the board, saying developers should have found a better spot for their project — perhaps something closer to a highway.

"I'm very concerned if a project is or appears detrimental to my district," Kelsey said. "I have some concerns. These folks obviously were interested in buying the cheapest piece of property they could find, and that's never a good indication of where we're going here."

Other supervisors were more low-key.

"I think it's got to go through the process," O'Banion said. "Once it goes through the process, I will consider it."

Condren said there are other options for Riverside, but he and the other park organizers have come so far in the process here, they don't even want to think about Plan B.

He just has the finish line in mind.

When the old Riverside International Raceway was demolished, Condren snatched up two large chunks of asphalt from the old raceway, including pieces of the start and finish lines.

He saved them because he has plans for them.

"The idea is when we build the new Riverside, we will insert these chunks of the old Riverside into the new Riverside," he said. "It was kind of my home track. I had a lot of affection for it."

"We feel very honored to be able to copy it and rebuild it."

## **Voters to mull road tax ... again**

### **Supporters hope proposal to raise nearly \$1 billion has better luck than 1989 effort**

BY SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, May 23, 2005

Don't call the proposed half-cent sales tax intended to help bolster Kern County's roads money a half-cent sales tax.

Call it the "local transportation measure." Or, better yet, the "safe roads measure." Talk about what it will do for air quality and congestion.

But don't use the "T" word.

Around here, "tax" is a four-letter word.

It's rarely uttered by people promoting the half-cent sales tax. After all, voters killed the measure last time they had a chance.

Despite the marketing, voters aren't stupid. They know a tax when they see one. But proponents worry the word "tax" will tune voters out before they hear what it buys them.

"I don't know anyone who likes the word tax," said City Councilman David Couch. "There's a knee-jerk against it."

Kern's anti-tax leader, Michael Turnipseed, doesn't much care what the measure is called. He believes in this tax, which would raise nearly \$1 billion for transportation projects over 20 years.

"It's going to help alleviate problems we have," said Turnipseed, executive director of the Kern Taxpayers Association, which helped kill Kern's last transportation tax effort in 1989.

Turnipseed generally opposes new taxes. But with the state's record of renegeing on promised roads funding, "we had to take things into our own hands," he said.

Turnipseed is a member of the citizens' group putting the measure on the ballot in 2006. The group's last poll showed 58 percent of Kern voters supported the tax in 2003. It needs a two-thirds majority to pass.

The 1989 sales tax enjoyed a similar margin of support two years before its election, according to stories in *The Californian*. That tax would have passed with a simple majority, but fell short by 277 votes.

Opponents to the 1989 tax have gotten behind this one. Kern Taxpayers Association helped draft the list of projects the measure would fund, and proponents say the money will be fairly distributed throughout Kern based on population and traffic flow.

It will also have an oversight committee to make sure the money goes where it should.

Kern is one of California's last metropolitan areas without a half-cent transportation tax. Meanwhile, federal grants go to "self-help" counties that tax themselves and Kern misses out.

Fresno has gotten as much as \$300 million from these grants over 20 years, according to local planners.

Kern residents now pay a 7.25 percent sales tax.

The additional half cent would raise \$900 million over 20 years, according to conservative estimates.

Half the tax revenue would fund regional roads projects and \$335 million would pay for maintenance and reconstruction. The leftovers -- at least \$127 million -- would fund buses, bike lanes and other projects to improve air quality.

If the tax passes, Kern would likely be eligible for \$10 million to \$15 million per year in federal "self-help" grants, according to planners at Kern Council of Governments, which coordinates regional roads funding.

Passing the tax wouldn't solve Kern's transportation woes entirely. Its population is set to double in 20 years, and residents drive more than ever. It will take \$3.2 billion to satisfy Kern's transportation needs in the next two decades, according to the council. If the sales tax passes, Kern will still be short about \$500 million.

The League of Women Voters is watching all this closely, and will announce in September whether it supports the measure. It's waiting for the bill to be written before endorsing anything.

"The devil is in the details," said Julia Linfesty, who heads up the league's transportation committee.

## **County may rule on quarry**

### **Supervisors also to discuss strip mining at creek**

By David Castellon, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Monday, May 23, 2005:

A 10-year battle over whether to allow a rock quarry in Woodlake could be settled Tuesday with a vote by Tulare County supervisors.

In addition, the supervisors also could hear from people arguing for and against allowing strip mining for sand on a stretch of Deer Creek south of Porterville.

The decision on whether to allow Kaweah River Rock to build a second quarry east of state Route 245 had been scheduled for a vote during last Tuesday's supervisors meeting, but the board members put off the decision while they wait for the county's Resource Management Agency to address last-minute concerns raised about air quality and traffic around the proposed 280-acre site.

Valley Citizens for Water, a group of neighbors fighting the quarry project, already had raised concerns over the quarry's effects on groundwater and flooding.

Then Delano-based Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment raised additional questions about air quality from rock crushing and traffic from the quarry operation, which resulted in delaying the vote.

On Tuesday, during the board's regular weekly meeting, Resource Management officials will address those concerns, said Eric Coyne, a spokesman for the supervisors. After that, he said, it's expected the matter will finally come to a vote. According to the supervisors' agenda, they are



scheduled after the public meeting to have a closed-session meeting with county counsel to discuss anticipated litigation by Valley Citizens for Water if the vote on the quarry permit doesn't go their way.

Meanwhile, another controversy could heat up during the public comments portion of the supervisors' meeting on the Tulare County Planning Commission's decision to grant a permit allowing strip mining for sand on Deer Creek, south of Porterville.

Redding-based Jaxon Enterprises plans to dig up sand for mixing concrete from the creek bed when it's dry, but a group of neighbors, ranchers and environmentalists calling themselves the "Committee to Save Deer Creek" have appealed the permit, leaving it to the supervisors to decide.

Travis Dean, environmental compliance officer with Jaxon, declined to discuss the permit. And a call to the company's president was not returned.

Patrick Ford, a project manager for the Resource Management Agency, said the strip mining project originally was proposed in 2001 by Jaxon, which already mines sand from Deer Creek eight miles south of Porterville, about four miles upstream of the proposed second mining operation.

"It's good, quality sand," better for making concrete than the sand mined at the current operation, Deer Creek Asphalt, Ford said. "They just want to acquire an additional source of sand for their operation."

But the first proposal was shot down by the Tulare County Planning Commission in 2003 because of public opposition, along with concerns that digging 20 feet down into the creek bed might create environmental problems and erode the base of the Road 256 bridge just 250 feet from the proposed excavation area.

So the company came back with a scaled-down proposal last year, Ford said. "Now the excavation area's a thousand feet from the bridge, and it's only five feet in depth."

Resource Management is asking the supervisors to deny the appeal and let the project go forward.

Despite the changes to the plan, Gratian Bidart and other members of the Committee to Save Deer Creek still oppose granting the mining permit.

Bidart, a rancher who owns land along Deer Creek just upstream of where the mining would occur, said his concerns include the loss of sand eroding the creek and lowering water levels, the latter of which might harm wetlands and reduce the available water that keeps his grazing grass green.

"The water level is very shallow there" when there is water in the creek, he said. "And when you dig five feet deep, it will drain water into that pit."

In addition, Bidart said, there are concerns that the high volume of dump trucks coming to and from the mining area would damage nearby roads and create traffic safety problems.

## **Charged up**

### **Electric car owners explain why they're so gung-ho on the concept.**

By Jody Murray / The Fresno Bee  
Sunday, May 22, 2005

Marc Geller turns the key to his compact sport utility vehicle and nothing happens.

Well, that's the way it sounds.

A motor powered by watts, not gas, packs little in the way of rumble.

His Toyota RAV4 EV (for "electric vehicle") gets him around the streets of San Francisco, where he lives. The vehicle is ideal for short-hop trips common to urban life. And those trips don't include a stop at a gas pump. He plugs in the SUV each night, and it's good to go the next day.

"All I can say is that the car has never failed me," says Geller, a 50-year-old photographer who has owned it since August; before that, he owned an electric Ford THINK for three years. "It's an amazing thing to do what you need to do every day and not buy gasoline and not pollute.

"It's the whole enchilada, really."

The big auto manufacturers, however, don't see eye-to-eye with Geller and other electric-car owners. Toyota, General Motors and other carmakers have shut down production of highway-capable electrics, and in most cases have not allowed people who leased electric cars to buy them outright when the leases expired.

Meanwhile, cars that combine electric and internal-combustion power — hybrids — have become the Next Hip Thing. Toyota, which offers the Jelly Belly-shaped Prius hybrid, says it has sold 80,000 of them in the United States. Last week, Toyota said it will build hybrid versions of its popular Camry at a Kentucky plant.

The hybrid's rising star is heartening to owners and fans of pure electric cars for reasons ranging from environmental concern to national security. But for some, it's also a bit galling.

"In truth, a Prius is closer to a Hummer than it is to my RAV4," Geller says, "because it still has an internal-combustion engine." David Raboy and Heather Bernikoff use a Ford Ranger to get around their 116-acre spread in Mariposa County. And their truck is much closer to Geller's RAV4 than to a Hummer.

A series of batteries encased beneath the Ranger's bed make the truck go. Its owners say they get 60 to 80 miles from a full charge. The truck can top 75 mph, and the battery case gives it a low center of gravity "so it handles more like a Porsche than a workhorse," Raboy says.

The couple had to work overtime to earn ownership of the Ranger, which they leased in 2001 (the truck formerly was in a business fleet) from a Sacramento dealership. In November, as the three-year lease expired, Ford notified them they would have to turn in the Ranger. The company did not offer an option to buy the truck.

Ford said it did not want to be on the hook for liability or servicing problems. The couple responded with letters and phone calls. "We were willing to sign any waivers," Raboy says.

When it became clear conventional communication wouldn't work, Raboy and Bernikoff took a bold and attention-grabbing step. In January, they parked the Ranger in front of a Sacramento dealership and hung a banner in front of it that read: "Save Dave's Ranger. Zero Emissions NOW!"

The couple, along with some friends, shared the duty of baby-sitting the Ranger around the clock. They got the expected coverage from local TV and newspapers, but it still took eight days before the dealership's manager came to them and gave Raboy a slip of paper with a phone number to the manager's boss.

"So I called the district manager and he said, 'Yeah, we're going to sell it to you.'"

The banner today is draped over a table in the couple's airy, open home. Raboy, a 34-year-old computer-software consultant, and Bernikoff, a 35-year-old grant consultant, manage 37 head of cattle on an undulating spread a few miles north of Catheys Valley.

The Ranger is parked on the grass a few yards from solar panels that augment the home's electric power. The words "ZERO EMISSIONS" stand out in white letters against the black paint job. A "Howard Dean for America" sticker clings to the rear bumper, not far from the "PLUGNGO" license plate.

Raboy and Bernikoff moved to Mariposa County from Pleasant Hill about two years ago. The surroundings remind Bernikoff of her childhood upbringing in rural Tuolumne County, not far from Yosemite National Park.

The couple say their embrace of electric and solar power certainly has strong environmental motivations. The source of electric power is especially clean on the West Coast, where much of it is generated by hydroelectric plants.

But their motivations also have a strong global — and political — edge. The horror of 9/11 and the resulting battle against terrorism have sharpened their resolve against foreign oil, the prime source of gasoline.

"We just feel so liberated to be disconnected from the oil exploration, oil protection, oil delivery cycle," Bernikoff says. (The couple does own a conventional car for longer trips.)

"It's all about national security," Raboy adds. "It's so stupid that we're beholden to countries that house terrorists."

Like other electric-car enthusiasts, the couple cast a jaded eye at the hybrids. "They're OK," Bernikoff says, "but they're not going to cure our long-term energy problems or our dependency on oil."

Mass-produced electric cars capable of highway driving started rolling off the assembly line in the late 1990s. Leading the way was General Motors' EV1, which debuted in 1996.

The EV1, along with other electric cars, was not marketed or sold in the central San Joaquin Valley. The automakers stuck to markets such as Southern California, Arizona and the San Francisco Bay Area, where they thought they would find people with deeper pockets and stronger environmental concern.

At first, the aerodynamic two-seaters had a range of about 60 miles per charge. Improvements in electronics and battery technology led to a "Gen II" EV1 in 1999 that boasted between 100 and 140 miles per charge. (The EV1 also was pricey, with a tag of about \$35,000.)

Chelsea Sexton, who was part of GM's EV1 marketing team, says that with today's lithium-ion battery technology, an EV1 would have a range of 300 miles — more than enough, she says, to allay concerns about being left high and dry with no place to charge up.

The batteries were the most common source of problems with the car, especially with the first-generation EV1, Sexton says. The problems decreased, but not completely, with the Gen IIs.

No one, however, will ever see what an EV1 could do with today's technology. In 2002, GM denied lessees' requests to purchase their cars. The carmaker rounded up the vehicles and transported them to Arizona, where they were crushed for scrap.

GM has said it had to reclaim the cars because there wasn't a large enough supply of the car's 2,000 parts. That could make the vehicles unsafe and lead to lawsuits, the company said, also citing legal obligations to service the cars.

Sexton was among protesters who earlier this year held a 28-day vigil at a GM employee training center in Burbank, where 78 condemned EV1s were stored. They were unable to stop transport trucks that arrived over several days and hauled the cars away.

Sexton, now 29 and a consultant for smaller automotive companies, says her work on GM's EV1 team was a labor of love. "We were passionate about the technology and what it meant. ... The more we were told we couldn't do something, the more we were determined to do it."

The EV1, along with other electrics of its era such as the Ford THINK, fell in line with the California Air Resources Board's 1990 edict that, by 2003, 10% of all cars sold in the state could not produce any fuel emissions. (Ford pulled the plug on the THINK in 2002.) GM and DaimlerChrysler, along with several automakers, fought the mandate with a federal lawsuit. In June 2002, they won an injunction against its enforcement in U.S. District Court in Fresno.

By then, the push for electric cars was low on juice. Automakers were abandoning their production and beginning to turn to hybrids, which they said would conserve fuel while solving the limited-range issue that dogged the electrics.

Fans of electric cars, however, say the range thing is a dodge. The vehicles do a great job with around-town trips, which is what consumes most of our driving time, they say.

"The electric car is fantastic, but it won't take you cross-country," says Folsom resident Tom Dowling, who leased two EV1s and now owns a pair of electric-powered Toyota RAV4s. "It's not truly practical for the average person."

Dowling, 68, was drawn to electric cars from a technological angle; his father worked for San Francisco's Muni transit system, which used electric-powered buses. Dowling drives the SUVs around town but keeps a conventionally powered car in the garage for longer trips ("I only take it out every two or three weeks").

The RAV4s tend to advertise themselves. They come from the factory with big "EV" decals on the door panels. And then there's that lack of engine noise.

Dowling said people will ask whether he puts gas in the SUV (no), how far he can go on a full charge (between 80 and 100 miles) and how much the vehicle costs (about \$42,000 retail, though California kicks in a \$9,000 rebate).

"People will tell me, 'Thank you,'" Dowling says. "What they're saying is, 'Thank you for cleaning up the environment. I probably wouldn't do it myself.'"

Back in 1998, Dowling and some other EV1 drivers drove to Truckee and linked up with Greg Hanssen, who had piloted his EV1 from Los Angeles to the central San Joaquin Valley, up through Yosemite and over Tioga Pass, and farther north to Interstate 80. Together, they formed an EV1 convoy back to Sacramento.

The trek, designed to attract media attention (Hanssen and the car got a write-up in *The Bee*), also required some planning to bridge the car's limited range. Diesel-powered generators, for instance, were set up in Yosemite to give the EV1 a charge.

"I saw it as more of a cool toy than as an environmental statement," Hanssen says. "I became more environmentally minded later."

Today, Hanssen is a partner in a company called EDrive, which is developing an add-on for hybrids that will allow owners to plug the car into any 110-volt outlet. The package beefs up the car's electric power; the company says a "plug-in hybrid" would average 100 to 150 miles per gallon for the first 60 miles after a charge.

Toyota has said it has no plans to produce a plug-in version of the Prius, noting that it would add up to \$5,000 to the car's sticker price. So Hanssen and his colleagues have stepped in (another start-up company, CalCars, is developing similar technology).

"All we're saying is, 'Look at what you could have done with a bigger battery,'" Hanssen says.

People such as Dowling, Raboy and Bernikoff also support plug-in hybrids, saying they are a strong compromise between electric and fuel power. But they remain frustrated by what could have been.

"It's a shame the U.S. automakers are losing their technological edge when they had it all along," Raboy says, "and I'm driving it."

## **Politics, asbestos mix in foothills**

**A long-divisive debate about growth spills over into the region's asbestos controversy.**

By Mary Lynne Vellinga, staff writer

Sacramento Bee, Monday, May 23, 2005

State Sens. Deborah Ortiz and Dave Cox recently attended the same legislative hearing on naturally occurring asbestos, but judging from their reactions, they could have been on opposite sides of the Capitol.

Afterward, Cox expressed concern that asbestos dangers were being overblown by anti-growth "activists" who testified at the hearing.

Where Cox saw activists, Ortiz saw "soccer moms" who live near asbestos veins churned up by development in El Dorado Hills. She said the risks of breathing asbestos fibers should not be downplayed.

"I happen to believe that asbestos is very serious in general, and this is a particularly problematic type of asbestos," she said.

The lawmakers' differing reactions suggest how politics could affect the response of elected leaders to the issue of naturally occurring asbestos in the fast-growing foothills.

The El Dorado citizenry also appears divided. Some who have contacted The Bee in recent weeks say the county is being singled out for no good reason, putting their property values at risk. They point out that naturally occurring asbestos is present in many counties in the foothills and along the coast.

Others say they are worried and want more information about the risks. They fault the county for not acting more aggressively to disseminate information about asbestos and to prevent exposure.

Cox is a Fair Oaks Republican who represents El Dorado Hills and Folsom, two communities where naturally occurring asbestos has been disturbed by development. Ortiz is a Sacramento Democrat who chairs the Senate Health Committee.

"Ms. Ortiz feels very passionately and has strong feelings; we just draw different conclusions," Cox said.

"I have a far more urban, environmental perspective," Ortiz offered.

In El Dorado Hills, Republicans like Cox dominate local politics. Elected officials tend to be pro-business, and the local supervisors recently adopted a general plan that could mean more than 80,000 new residents by 2025, many of them in El Dorado Hills.

But a vocal minority has challenged the growth policies, and El Dorado politicians say they're concerned growth foes will exaggerate the risks of asbestos to build support for their view.

"One of the more contentious debates (in El Dorado County) has been land use," said Ray McNally, a GOP consultant. "Politically, I'm sure the no-growthers will seize on the asbestos issue."

U.S. Rep. John Doolittle, the Roseville Republican who represents El Dorado Hills, has expressed similar fears.

Doolittle recently came out in support of a measure by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat, to authorize \$40 million for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to locate natural asbestos deposits, establish remediation plans and determine exposure standards.

But even as he did so, he accused environmentalists of "salivating" over the issue as "another arrow in the quiver to pierce the heart of growth."

Doolittle could not be reached for comment last week, but his press aide, Laura Blackann, reiterated his position.

"Congressman Doolittle wants to make sure any action taken in El Dorado is based on facts and not on overzealous environmentalists looking to exploit this issue and stunt growth," Blackann said.

Some of those at odds with county leaders say their pro-growth bent has blinded them to the seriousness of the asbestos hazard.

"Politically, they're trying to crush (the issue)," said former El Dorado County Supervisor Sam Bradley, a critic of the county's new general plan.

"You've got supervisors that are bought and paid for by the development community. They're the ones saying, 'build, build, build.' It's the economy of our county."

Ortiz called the county's response over the years to reports of a potential asbestos hazard "very defensive."

"I think this is one of those issues that is not Democrat or Republican," she said. "Soccer moms in El Dorado County still want protection for their kids."

For their part, local elected leaders say they, too, view asbestos through the lens of human health, not politics.

"It's not a political issue, it's not a land-use issue, it's a health and safety issue," said El Dorado County Supervisor Helen Baumann. "That's been the position of the entire Board of Supervisors."

But the health risks of periodic exposure to naturally occurring asbestos remain unclear. And the lack of concrete data leaves plenty of room for politics to fill the vacuum.

The federal EPA recently released the results of air testing that found El Dorado Hills residents were exposed to significantly elevated levels of airborne asbestos when they played sports, jogged or biked in popular Community Park and nearby schools.

But the federal scientists can't say exactly how much of this type of asbestos exposure it takes to cause disease, or what percentage of people exposed might get sick with cancer and other illnesses.

In the absence of such data, some politicians - including Cox and Baumann - say it's appropriate to continue building on asbestos-containing rock and soil, as long as dust controls are imposed and bare dirt is capped after construction.

Cox's vast 1st Senate District includes many Sierra communities affected because they are undergoing development in geologic belts where asbestos occurs. Those areas include portions of Amador and Calaveras counties, the foothills of El Dorado and Placer counties and the city of Folsom in Sacramento County.

In many situations, the concerns can be addressed with appropriate landscaping, Cox said. "If you pave over it, it takes care of the issue," he added.

Others, including Ortiz, have their doubts. "I think we're a long way from saying watering down the dust is safe," Ortiz said.

She added, "It's premature to say a no-growth policy is a solution, just as I think it's too soon to say building on and around it is completely safe."

"The people who are already there deserve answers, and the people who are proposing to build there deserve answers. The only way you get there is with sound science."

Ortiz is carrying legislation that would direct a team of state specialists to develop ways to assess and minimize the risk to residents.

Until now, the issue of naturally occurring asbestos hasn't played much of a role in the region's growth battles. Even in El Dorado County, where local officials for years have imposed dust controls on construction, asbestos takes a back seat to concerns such as traffic and smog.

But following the EPA test results in El Dorado Hills and recent disclosures that asbestos may be present in a broader swath of the region, that may be changing.

In 2004, the same type of asbestos found in El Dorado Hills - a particularly potent form called amphibole - was unearthed at the site of a high school planned to serve Folsom's Empire Ranch development, prompting the Sacramento Air Quality Management District to impose special dust controls on construction there.

Now, state geologists say asbestos-containing bedrock extends through much of Folsom south to Rancho Murieta, through thousands of acres Folsom plans to annex and develop.

As a result, opponents of a plan to build almost 2,000 homes in Rancho Murieta now list the potential presence of asbestos as one of their concerns.

"I've got two small children, and I don't have any desire for them to get exposed," said Brad Sample, an ecological risk assessor who lives in Rancho Murieta.

"If Sacramento County does something that creates (asbestos) exposure, they're going to have a lot of liability because they knew ahead of time," Sample added. "The county's responsibility is significant."

Developer Gerry Kamilos said asbestos has yet to be found in Rancho Murieta, but if it is, the builders will impose dust controls.

Like many in the development industry, Kamilos pointed out that serpentine, the greenish rock that often bears asbestos, is ubiquitous in the state. So much so, it's the state rock.

"If it's found, the way in which you proceed is with construction protocols," Kamilos said. "I don't think it's very complex at all."

## **Port's sulfur piles under fire**

### **Regulators set Sept. 1 deadline to develop plan to cover supplies**

By Dana Nichol, staff writer

(Stockton) Record, Sunday, May 22, 2005

STOCKTON -- The brilliant yellow mountains of sulfur that are a landmark at the Port of Stockton will disappear from view if water pollution regulators get their way.

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board has given the port and three businesses that handle or store sulfur there until Sept. 1 to come up with a plan for covered storage buildings for the sulfur.

Such tight containment is needed to keep the sulfur away from rain and wind, officials say. Regional board staff say the sulfur is now escaping from the storage piles and mixing with water to form a potent acidic brew that could pollute groundwater.

During an inspection March 30, regional board staff saw sulfur dust blowing from the piles into nearby drainage ponds. Tests of the ponds found the sulfur formed acids capable of leaching toxic minerals from soils.

Port Deputy Director Jeff Kasper didn't return calls placed over two days, and Port Director Richard Aschieris is on a marketing trip to the Far East.

Lynn Wall, a consultant with Jones & Stokes who is doing environmental work for the port, said her client will need to study the problem before deciding on a solution. But she balked at the idea that the port should build a covered building for sulfur.

"There is only one facility on the West Coast that is covered, and that is down in the port of L.A. And there are other sites there that are uncovered," Wall said. "This is a new requirement from the regional board."

The port and the firms that work with the sulfur have until June 1 to submit a plan for investigating possible groundwater pollution from the sulfur. That study, in turn, is to provide the information for the solution they will propose to the regional board in September.

The groundwater study also is supposed to look at the impacts of past activities, such as the storage of petroleum coke and coal.

Sulphur is big business. The port shipped 263,815 tons of it last year, according to the port's annual report. The sulfur went to Central America, West Africa, Brazil and India. It's used as a fertilizer and by chemical manufacturers.

The sulfur comes to the port in molten form. Truck tankers transport it after it's removed from crude oil by Bay Area refineries. It is "prilled" into a pellet form that is supposed to be dust free.

The firms H.J. Baker and Bay Sulfur process and store sulfur at the port. Bay Sulfur recently was sold for \$6 million to Martin Midstream Partners LP of Kilgore, Texas. Metropolitan Stevedore and the port transport the sulfur.

H.J. Baker last year spent \$2 million to open an expanded sulfur plant at the port.

H.J. Baker stores its sulfur on an asphalt surface. Bay Sulfur keeps its sulfur on a concrete pad surrounded by a concrete containment wall.

Wall said drainage from the piles goes to storm water ponds that are lined with clay to prevent the runoff from leaking into the water table.

But pollution inspectors were concerned by tests done in 2003 that found high concentrations of sulfate in several groundwater wells nearby the site operated by Metropolitan Stevedore. Those wells are under a site where petroleum coke once was stored.

G. Fred Lee, a chemist with decades of experience with toxic and acidic waste, said he was surprised at the potency of the acid detected during the recent inspection.

"This is a serious problem that needs to be addressed," Lee said.

## **Lawn-chemical overuse spurs widening restrictions**

Saturday, May 21, 2005

Published in the Orange County Register, from The Toledo Blade

The public tends to blame farmers for the water and air pollution triggered by pesticide use, but concerns over excessive use of chemicals to promote green lawns has spurred a growing move toward bans across Canada and curbs among some U.S. cities.

Use of pesticides is now banned in 70 Canadian municipalities, including Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Halifax.

While not as common in the United States, pesticide and other restrictions have emerged in varying degrees.

In Minnesota, known as "the land of 10,000 lakes," some cities ban or severely restrict phosphorus because that fertilizer is a nutrient that promotes the growth of algae in water.

In California, a number of cities, including San Francisco and Santa Monica, have banned pesticides on municipal property, such as parks. The limits have no effect on general use.

Wider pesticide bans are difficult to enact on a local level because 41 states, including California, have laws that forbid communities from enacting general bans without state approval.

Glenn Brank, a spokesman for the California Department of Pesticide Regulation, said the state encourages preventive steps that reduce pesticide use.

As a practical matter, Brank said, a general local ban, for example across Orange County, would be difficult or impossible to enforce. "If Orange County banned pesticides over the counter, homeowners could simply go across the border to Los Angeles or elsewhere to buy them," he said.

The growing move toward restrictions has spurred intense public-relations campaigns.

Project Evergreen, a trade association that represents pesticide makers, applicators, garden centers and mower manufacturers, said it was fed up by environmental groups who are leading the push for the bans.

Using a pair of masculine- looking, leather-worn pair of work gloves as its centerpiece, Project Evergreen launched a "Gloves Are Off" campaign in industry publications to urge lawn-care- and landscaping-business owners to take a stand against environmentalists calling for pesticide bans.



Beyond Pesticides, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental group, countered with a campaign that mocks the pesticide industry.

Displaying a photo of a feminine-looking pair of gardening gloves, the group countered with a headline that read, "Get a Grip," and claimed that activists were being attacked by powerful industry lobbyists.

It claims thousands of children and pets are unnecessarily exposed to dangerous chemicals - even in the air they breathe inside their homes - because of what gets tracked or blown indoors from neighboring properties.

In suburbs, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the density of chemicals applied per acre can be up to four times as great as what's applied on farmland.

The EPA's position is that lawn chemicals are safe if applied properly, but it encourages consumers to pursue other options when practical.

"It's amazing how many people don't read the label or think more is better," said Heather Anhalt, a pesticide specialist for the EPA's regional office in Chicago.

[Modesto Bee editorial, Monday, May 23, 2005:](#)

### **Move toward recycling right choice at landfill**

Stanislaus County is looking into recycling as a third garbage disposal option, after burying and burning. And its exploration of this idea is being conducted in the bright light of sunshine, with input from neighbors and critics. In approach and philosophy, this represents a real turnaround.

It was only five years ago that county officials were pursuing a massive expansion of the Fink Road landfill and talking about becoming a major importer of garbage from other counties. When the public got wind of the megadump plans, there was a major stink. And while county supervisors ultimately backed away from the plan, the whole deal caused a serious erosion of public trust. Lingering anger over the landfill and related issues contributed to the defeat of two longtime county supervisors last year.

Not only did West Side residents not like the prospect of becoming a regional dumping ground, many still don't like living near the existing garbage-burning plant. While the Covanta Stanislaus Inc. plant, located at the landfill along Interstate 5 south of Patterson, meets federal and regional air pollution requirements, it still concerns some residents.

Refuse hauled to the landfill by individuals, commercial haulers and garbage companies either goes into the landfill (500 tons a day) or the waste-to-energy plant (800 tons a day). Electricity produced at the plant is sold to Pacific Gas & Electric.

Burying garbage is neither easy nor cheap. It costs millions to create a "cell," which has to be lined to prevent the kind of ground and water contamination that occurred over the years around the Geer Road dump. At the current rate of dumping, the county figures the Fink Road site will be full in 18 years.

With prodding by Supervisor Jim DeMartini and Chief Executive Officer Rick Robinson, county officials are looking at the prospect of setting up a major recycling facility at the landfill that would remove wood, metal and concrete from the materials that are buried.

The Monterey Regional Waste Management District, which serves the western half of Monterey County, provides a successful model of how this can work. It sells metal to commercial recyclers and does wood chipping on site, for example. It also operates a second-hand store that sells discarded items to the public. About 35 percent of the garbage that comes into the facility is diverted for recycling. It's an impressive operation that has proven not only financially efficient but also the right thing to do environmentally. The Monterey facility has been recognized nationally.

It's too early to judge the overall merits of a Stanislaus recycling center because there will be significant costs to build and staff the facility. A full proposal is expected to go to the Board of

Supervisors in June or July. But the idea is very promising and the way in which it is being approached is commendable.

To learn more about the Monterey facility, go to the district's Web site, [www.mrwmd.org](http://www.mrwmd.org).

[Fresno Bee column, Sunday, May 22, 2005:](#)

### **Air quality not part of discussion of growth**

By Bill McEwen / The Fresno Bee

Hallelujah! A project as nice as those on the north side will provide jobs, homes and business opportunities in long-neglected southeast Fresno.

Fancher Creek is touted by City Council Member Mike Dages as the equivalent of River Park, Palm Bluffs and The Dominion rolled into one.

That might be hype, but Dages is excused for gushing about the 424-acre development.

Fancher Creek has the potential to revitalize an area well beyond the project's borders of Clovis, Belmont and Armstrong avenues and Kings Canyon Road.

The mall will attract shoppers from Clovis and cities south of Fresno, and it will cause neighboring property values to rise, thereby attracting new investment in a part of town that needs it. Developer Ed Kashian says Fancher Creek will have design features such as roundabouts and narrow streets.

Roundabouts you probably know about because of River Park. Kashian is a big fan of the circles because, he says, they move traffic more efficiently than intersections while reducing accidents and air pollution.

Narrow neighborhood streets, he says, force drivers to slow down, thereby improving safety and cutting noise.

I imagine narrow streets are profitable, too, allowing builders to whittle costs and put more homes — or bigger lots — on a plot of land.

Sprinkle with pedestrian/bike trails connecting the mall with old Pasadena-style homes, widen major streets, build a park, and voilà: You've got a neighborhood done right.

Or so it appears.

But there's something missing: a way for people in Fancher Creek's 2,023 residences to get to work or downtown without adding to the region's air pollution problem.

What's needed is a grand mixed-used boulevard that offers an alternative route to Freeway 180. It could be either Tulare Avenue or Kings Canyon. Whatever road is used, it should have rapid mass transit, bike/electric car lanes and beautiful landscaping. If the boulevard is successful, this approach could be expanded to Blackstone Avenue.

People have been talking about building light rail in Fresno for years, but the idea has gone nowhere because light rail affixed to aerial structures is expensive.

A better idea is light-rail-on-wheels, which costs much less but quickly carries passengers over dedicated lanes. Now that would be cool.

If the city wants to turn Fancher Creek into smart growth, it must stop ignoring the obvious — more pollution — and adopt new transit strategies.

That requires political courage and money.

Political courage is in short supply at City Hall, but financing a light-rail boulevard can be done with help from federal, state and private grants. Passage of a Measure C extension would provide funding, too.

Finally, the City Council, or the Fresno County Board of Supervisors, could follow the lead of Kern County and impose air quality impact fees on new development.

That, of course, requires much more political courage than simply approving a nice project by a powerful developer in a neglected part of town.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sunday, May 22, 2005:](#)

### **Cleaning up the air**

I want to talk about the pollution here. I have been living in this area for five years.

One of my main concerns is about pollution. The air is filthy here and I have solutions to clean up the air. Some solutions are to recycle more instead of throwing things away that can be recycled and don't drive as much as we do every day.

There are a lot of things we can do to clean up the air.

Lisa Orsbun, Age 12  
Hallmark Charter School, Sanger

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sat., May 21, 2005:](#)

### **More local control**

The response from several Valley farm bureaus to The Bee's endorsement of Senate Bill 999 (letter May 16) appears to miss the point of this important legislation.

Valley residents are experiencing epidemic levels of asthma and cardiopulmonary illness caused by air pollution, resulting in more than 1,200 premature deaths per year, with annual health care bills over \$350 million.

The impact on Valley children's health is of particular concern, with one in six suffering from asthma. When agribusiness and the petroleum lobby (SB 999's most prominent opposition) decide childhood has become too expensive, haven't we already lost local control? Children are the region's most important stakeholders. But currently, no one represents their interests on the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's board.

We have recent legislation to thank for progress being made on curbing agricultural emissions, and citizen-led litigation to remove an unmerited exemption for west-side oil fields. Every sector of the Valley -- from homebuilders, to agriculture, to commuters -- must do its part to clean our air. No one should get special treatment or waivers. SB 999 will create a better-informed and more democratic air district board.

Mark Stout Member, Central Valley Air Quality Coalition  
Fresno

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sat., May 21, 2005:](#)

### **Better representation**

Kudos to Fresno County Supervisors Susan Anderson and Henry Perea and Fresno City Council Members Tom Boyajian, Brian Calhoun, Mike Dages, Henry T. Perea and Cynthia Sterling. Valley residents can thank these clean-air politicians for their recent votes and letters of endorsement for Senate Bill 999, "The Healthy Children, Healthy Communities and Healthy Economy in the San Joaquin Valley Act of 2005."

State Sen. Mike Machado's SB 999 would add much-needed health and scientific expertise to the governing board of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. It would also add permanent representation for our region's three largest cities: Fresno, Bakersfield and Stockton. Existing seats for supervisors from each of the district's eight counties and one seat each for a small- and medium-size city would remain.

The current board structure has failed the people of the San Joaquin Valley and must be revamped. Everyone's health hangs in the balance. The support of Valley residents and our local, elected officials is critical in Sacramento. People who want clean air should contact their state Assembly members and senators now and voice support for SB 999.

Kevin Hall, Air Quality Chair, Sierra Club, Tehipite Chapter

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Fri., May 20, 2005:](#)

### **Move track to the airport**

Editor: Suggestion: Move Merced Airport operations to Castle and put Riverside Motorsports Park on the current Merced Airport site.

This would: Save farmland, give Merced Airport the fourth-largest runway in the state and open possibilities for larger plane traffic (and more jobs). Plus, Castle already is configured for air traffic support business operations.

Let the racetrack-related businesses locate in Merced's industrial park area.

Race fans would have easy access from Highway 99 and the railroad and would be closer to Merced's motel and restaurant facilities, reducing cross-town traffic and air pollution.

Think about it!

E. EILEEN DUDDY  
Atwater

[Visalia Times-Delta, Commentary, Saturday, May 21, 2005:](#)

### **Common denominator**

**Great Valley Center works on belief Valley communities share common challenges, goals**

By Carol Whiteside, President, Great Valley Center

### **What were the conclusions from your recent Great Valley Center conference, "Growing a Community?"**

Probably the overwhelming conclusion that was unavoidable was that people from all parts of the Valley and from different backgrounds have common interests. Everybody is trying to figure out how to deal with enormous changes that are happening and how they affect people's lives, their jobs, their kids, their families and their communities.

The other thing that came out was that change is both a challenge and an opportunity. Everybody is looking for a way to make it better.

### **Do you see more communities embracing principles of smart growth, conservation of resources and attention to the precious limited space in our Valley?**

It's slow in coming, but beginning to be evident. It's not across the board, not universal.

So there are some communities planning for growth and others are not.

It's a huge issue. What happens is that some communities have standards and enact some strict planning principles, and others don't. The two communities suffer from the same results - crowding, traffic, pollution, need for services - but they don't have the same opportunity to influence the outcome. So one community gets a lot of traffic it didn't plan for, and it doesn't have the revenue to build the new roads and traffic controls it needs.

### **Predictions continue for unprecedented growth in the Valley over the next few decades.**

### **What are your thoughts on how well prepared we are for that?**

I think the good news is we're all talking about it. The bad news is we're not very well prepared. We don't have a strategy. We don't have any realistic idea of how to cope with the enormous costs of the infrastructure that will be needed when all these people move here.

People are starting to recognize that we're all affected by what other communities do, but we're still not working together enough.

If we're not walking down the same road together, we risk repeating the random growth of places such as Los Angeles and San Jose.

### **Are growth and our current agriculture-based way of life in the Valley compatible?**

I think they are. I think not to consider them together would be a tragedy for this reason: The advantage of looking at the region broadly allows us to make tradeoffs and create a balance between all those things that need to be considered. It's much easier to plan for agriculture and for resources on a broad scale than in small parcels.

If we don't think about it carefully, we risk compromising both agriculture's ability to be viable and our environmental quality of life. And that's a result that most people do not think is desirable.

On the whole, most people appreciate agriculture and would like this to remain an agriculture-based region. It reflects our quality of life, the character of our communities and our heritage.

There's another big factor: Agriculture is enormously important to our economy, to jobs and investment and our ability to make a living here. If we were to wipe out agriculture and not have the economy to replace it, the Valley would be in a terrible mess.

Agriculture isn't just about having pretty peach blossoms; it's about the green stuff, which is cash.

### **What resources do you see as most threatened - land, water or air?**

I think we have to figure out where we have the most influence, and that is probably land. Land uses are local decisions, made by communities where we have a great deal of control.

Air we have some control over, with our own practices and development. But some parts of the air issue are truly regional, and we are dependent on some outside intervention for solutions.

The most difficult problem is water, because political control of water is not just done by population centers, but by state and federal governments that have the water projects and by resource regulation that puts use of water in conflict with agriculture, environmental and urban uses.

There is a hierarchy of solutions to how we manage resources, and we need to put our energies where we can do the most good.

### **Here in the central San Joaquin Valley, a number of huge residential housing developments have been proposed for Merced, Modesto, Selma, Clovis, Fowler, Reedley and Sanger, and we're talking from 500 to 3,000 homes in each. What do you make of such large developments?**

I actually think they are an opportunity. But there are risks involved.

The opportunity is that a large developer who does a master-plan community is often willing and able to deal with many of the amenities, infrastructure and things people would like to see. They can plan the streets so they curve. They can leave space for parks and schools. They can provide for a range of housing types, from luxury to affordable to multi-family, that a small developer can't do.

The risks are that the approving agencies - planning commissions and city councils - won't be demanding enough to insist on standards. My experience says that large-scale developers are willing to do the things that make for well-planned communities if you ask them. But you have to ask.

There are a couple of other risks.

Unless you're careful in the approval process, sometimes those large-scale developments are quite self-contained, and they have nothing to do with the character and context of the larger community. They end up being an entity unto themselves.

And I also think it's important that large-scale development doesn't just cherry-pick the high end, build luxury housing and leave the community to figure out how to house those who aren't as economically well-off.

There is a higher level of review for approval for those kinds of projects. They demand much more planning and oversight by the approval agencies.

What burns me is seeing a private developer come in and do all the planning that the approving agency should be doing. Then the only standards you have are the developer's standards. That's happening more and more, because planning departments see it as the easy way to get the projects moved along.

Having said that, there are huge opportunities in large-scale development if communities make sure they are part of a larger plan.

**The Great Valley Center recently issued a report that said economic conditions in the Valley were improving but still lagging far behind the rest of the state. What are the ramifications of that trend, and how do we reverse it?**

It means we can't rely on assumptions that it will get better by itself. That's the message. Lots of people think that we get bigger and things will get better. Not necessarily. More doesn't mean better.

The way we reverse it is we need a strategy. My concern is that every time there is a report about some aspect of the Valley -whether it is unemployment or education or economic development - we react to it by doing the same things we have been doing.

We need to have a long-term view and coordinate strategy on how to address the causes and not just the symptoms of our problems.

I look at things like educational attainment, telecommunications access and quality of life in communities that will attract investment: How can we preserve our uniqueness that will ultimately set us aside from everybody else?

Those must be thought out and coordinated. They don't come about by themselves.

**In what area do you see the greatest opportunity for improvement in the Central Valley?**

Growth. I think it's growth-driven. It provides the opportunity to change. When you're not growing, you don't have the opportunity to change things. If you're in downtown Detroit and dealing with poverty and disparity, you would die for population growth.

Because we are in the midst of growth, we have the opportunity to shape things. We can either exploit that and use it to our benefit or be victimized by it.

The opportunity to build new things, design and plan better is a huge opportunity that we don't want to squander.

What drives me is thinking about 20 years from now: How will we live with ourselves if we look back and say we had a chance to do this better and we blew it?

**Your organization is dedicated to having the people in the Great Central Valley think of themselves as belonging to an entity, and that the Valley will advance faster if we think regionally. How well is that thinking taking hold?**

I actually think there is progress in thinking that way. If you look at Public Policy Institute of California opinion polls we do every year, you can see the number of people who look at problems regionally is growing. More people are thinking of ourselves as a region.

We now have a coalition of members of Congress making sounds like they are working together. The thinking is fragile, but it's there.

You see people interested in development of Highway 99 as our lifeline for the region.

The presidential interagency task force is looking at the region in a different way.

So I think it is improving.

The problem is the thinking is there, but there's not much being done. There is no organizational capacity at the regional level. Governments are countywide. There is no official place for that conversation to happen.

We really need to find a way to set the table for the conversation. I think that it's part of our job at the Great Valley Center to build a constituency for that and to facilitate the conversation when people are ready to have it.