

**Fresno offers vans, gas for workers to commute**  
**City program hopes to relieve congestion, clean up Valley's air.**

By Jim Davis

The Fresno Bee

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Fresno unveiled a program Friday morning in which the city will lease vans and lend them to downtown commuters in a bid to relieve congestion and improve air quality.

Fresno Mayor Alan Autry gave the first set of keys to city employee Linda Easley, who will drive as many as 14 people to work every morning.

"It's like a normal set of keys, but I think it represents -- I know it does -- our commitment to clean air," Autry said.

The city will lease seven vans from Enterprise Rent-A-Car and will commit \$100,000 to the pilot program.

Fresno transit general manager Bruce Rudd said it's part of an effort by Fresno Area Express to tailor commuting programs to people's needs.

"We're hoping this program will expand to larger vans and midsize buses," Rudd said.

Other agencies have ride-share programs, but the new program is different because the city is paying for the vans and gasoline. Enterprise will insure the vans, which will display Operation Clean Air decals on the side.

Brenda Lauchner, a Fresno County Council of Governments planning coordinator who is working with the city, said the program will run until the money runs out. She said officials aren't sure when that will be.

"That's hard to pencil out," she said, adding that the city will be charged by Enterprise for miles driven and the size of the vans.

Government employees are the first to benefit from the program; the city wants to expand it to include private employers in downtown.

City officials expect the seven vans will each carry 14 people, taking dozens of cars off the road each morning.

"Some folks will say it's not enough," Autry said. "Well, it's not enough, but it's a start."

The idea for the van pool program came last year from Autry and City Council Member Jerry Duncan. The city sent an e-mail survey to downtown workers earlier this year. The city and the Council of Governments mapped where the commuters live and set up a program through the Enterprise Ride Share program. The program is meant to be as flexible as possible for the riders.

"The beautiful part of this process is it's not scripted," said John Downs, a FAX transit planning manager. "Here's the van. Here's the people. Work it out."

The city and Enterprise also guarantee rides home for the participants, even in emergencies, with either Enterprise providing rental cars or FAX workers giving rides to people.

Easley, a city claims specialist, will be driving from her home north of Sanger and picking people up each morning headed to City Hall.

The reporter can be reached at [jmdavis@fresnobee.com](mailto:jmdavis@fresnobee.com) or 441-6171.

#### TO REGISTER

People can register on the Web for a rideshare program at [www.valleyrides.com](http://www.valleyrides.com).

### **Air district leans toward 'extreme' status**

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MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer; email: [mweiser@bakersfield.com](mailto:mweiser@bakersfield.com)  
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Regional air quality officials are expected to opt for the federal government's worst smog status Thursday, an unprecedented move that could bring extra costs for many valley businesses. No other region of the country has ever voluntarily opted for the "extreme" designation under the Clean Air Act. Only the Los Angeles region currently carries this status, and it was forced to do so in 1990.

Officials say the valley has little choice. Presently classified as "severe" for its ozone pollution, the valley has until 2005 to meet federal clean-air standards. That is not possible, they say, without fuel and engine improvements that don't kick in until later.

Opting for the "extreme" category extends the cleanup deadline until 2010. Dave Jones, planning director for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the region can meet this deadline.

But it will come at a cost for some valley businesses. The air district estimates that 150 current businesses will have to get federal pollution permits because the triggering emission threshold falls from 25 tons to 10 tons per year under the extreme category. These permits cost \$5,000 each.

Other businesses may have to pay higher fees to relocate or expand in the valley to offset their impact on air quality.

And there is another, less-tangible cost: The stigma of the "extreme" designation. This could deter employers and residents from moving to the valley.

"There are some businesses that think just the designation itself gives the area a blacker eye than we already have," Jones said. "It's not something we're taking lightly."

The alternative could be even more damaging. Without the extreme designation, valley businesses would face federal sanctions of \$5,000 per ton of emissions starting in March. The air district estimates this could cost the region up to \$36 million.

Then in September, the valley could lose \$2 billion in federal highway funding and face a federal takeover of smog-control programs.

"Their hands are tied," said Kevin Hall, an air quality specialist with the Sierra Club's Tehipite Chapter. "The way I like to put it is, they're damned if they do and they're damned if they do."

Air district staffers are recommending approval of the "extreme" status. The district's governing board will consider the matter at its regular meeting Thursday. Copyright, 2003, The Bakersfield Californian

### **Supervisors may redesign dump sites**

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LAURA MALDONADO, Californian staff writer; [lmaldonado@bakersfield.com](mailto:lmaldonado@bakersfield.com)

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Burn dumps throughout the county need to be redesigned and Kern County is taking some first steps to find consultants for the job. A burn dump is a site where solid waste has been burned at a low temperature. The residual ashes and debris have been landfilled.

The sites pose health problems because lab tests of their ashes show the burning of nonhazardous household or municipal waste concentrates certain metals to unhealthy levels.

Burn ash is a problem if it becomes airborne, is eroded into surface water or comes in contact with skin. The dumps were phased out in the early 1970s in response to federal and state air quality legislation.

Typically, if the dump is in a rural area, it may not be considered as high a health risk. However, several Ford City families had to be temporarily relocated in March when the remnants of a dump were found in the soil of their yards.

This site is owned by the U.S. Department of Energy and was fenced off in 1997. At some point beforehand, however, it may have been graded, EPA officials said. Thus the contaminated soil was spread over the area where later houses were developed.

In that case, the EPA spent \$1.5 million excavating those properties and replacing the soils around the homes to protect the residents from lead poisoning. County officials said they were unable to find details for this site's history and are now looking to find a bidder who can remediate such sites now. The ashes in such dumps will be left in place and capped; consolidated to one area and capped; or cleaned entirely.

In other matters, the county will consider:

\* Meadows Field airport's plans to update its master plan and seek approval to issue a call for qualified preparers. The county adopted a master plan for the airport in 1989 and a terminal master plan was done in 2000 in connection with

the new air passenger terminal. This update will focus on air service development, infrastructure for industrial needs and air cargo development during the update. A \$450,000 Federal Aviation Grant is providing the majority of the money for the study. Airport Enterprise Funds already budgeted will provide the rest.

\* Restoring 19 positions to the Human Resources Department -- four supervisors and 15 technicians -- to keep up with the increased workload from the Medi-Cal cases. The Medi-Cal case load has increased 29 percent over the past two years. There has been an increase of more than 3,600 cases that has raised the caseload average to more than 400 per worker. The target is 250.

During the last year, human resources reorganized and eliminated 103 positions, staff reports show. The money for these restored positions would come from the more than \$2.4 million the department saved in salaries and benefits from the previous reorganization. If all the positions are filled at the highest pay levels, it would cost \$1.09 million annually to refill the positions. Federal and state money will reimburse the county fully for the hiring with no county match required.

\* Construction of a bike path from the California Living Museum to the Kern River Golf Course picnic area. The county and city have entered into a cooperative agreement to build the project with Proposition 12 money. Proposition 12 was passed in 2000 and is meant to provide safe neighborhood parks, clean water and air and coastal protection.

\* An amendment to an agreement with the city of Bakersfield for animal care services. The county and city put together a new animal control program in two weeks after the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals stopped providing services in July.

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