

Parlier picked for pilot air study

State develops plan to monitor city for effects of pesticides.

By Vanessa Colón / The Fresno Bee

Thursday, February 24, 2005

The state Department of Pesticide Regulation will place Parlier under the microscope for its new pilot project: monitoring the rural community's air for pesticides.

The project's long-range goal, though, is far more ambitious: fresh air and a clean environment for Californians who live near agriculture.

The department will unveil its plan today to monitor the city for a year and screen about two dozen pesticides, including fumigants and herbicides. Scientists will study the data to determine whether pesticide levels in the air could pose health hazards.

The project includes creation of a local advisory group to get the community's input on the study.

The pilot program, part of an environmental justice initiative launched by the California Environmental Protection Agency, will start in the summer. The findings in Parlier could help develop steps to reduce pesticide exposures and illnesses.

"It's a step in the right direction in understanding the contribution of pesticides and how it impacts the health of farmworkers," said Dr. Virginia Rondero Hernandez, associate director of research and evaluation for the Central California Children's Institute in Fresno.

Said Mary-Ann Warmerdam, director of the Department of Pesticide Regulation: "We view the Parlier pilot project as one more step in managing how pesticides are used."

Department officials and community activists say the pilot program will help determine the quality of the air, the extent of pesticide use and its effect on rural communities.

Fresno County had five definite, 20 probable and 26 possible cases of illness and injury incidents related to pesticide exposure in 2002, according to the department.

Rural communities might have higher concentrations of pesticides in the air compared to urban communities because of their proximity to agricultural fields, according to the department.

"People who live and work closest to agriculture deserve the same high standard of environmental protection as other Californians," Warmerdam said in a written statement.

Some members of the health community welcome the project, saying there's a lack of information on the effects of pesticides and other agents.

The effects of inert agents used to spread or enable the pesticide to stick to a crop are unknown, said Kevin Hamilton, a respiratory therapist and director of the asthma program at the Community Regional Medical Center in Fresno.

"We feel strongly that inert compounds need to be exposed," Hamilton said.

Pesticides trigger asthma, and there's potential for birth defects, he said.

"It can affect vision, the sense of smell. ... The basic brain neuro functions can be depressed," Hamilton said.

Parlier was chosen out of 83 potential sites around the state — 81 in Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties.

One community in Kern County and another in Stanislaus County also were considered.

The selection was based on factors such as the levels of pesticide use and whether the community has a significant ethnic population of children and adults. About 97% of Parlier's population is Latino, according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

All free transit rides on smog days OKd

by Michael Cabanatuan

S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, February 24, 2005

Regional transportation officials approved a plan Wednesday to give free rides on all Bay Area transit systems on days when air pollution threatens to exceed state and federal standards.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission approved the program, part of a plan with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to cut emissions.

Under the program, Bay Area commuters would get free morning rides aboard all regional transit agencies on the first five Spare the Air Days -- typically, summer and early fall days when forecasters believe the weather is right for generating an abundance of smog.

The commission set aside \$4 million for the program, which expands successful free-ride efforts last year on BART and for the past two years on the Livermore-Amador Valley Transit Authority.

Also Wednesday, the commission approved a \$119 billion spending plan through 2030 that seeks to tie transportation funding to smart growth, recommends a regional network of toll lanes and emphasizes maintenance of roads, highways and transit systems.

The plan sets aside 81 percent of the money for maintenance and 4 percent for improvements that increase the efficiency of the transportation system. The remaining 15 percent is divided up among a long list of highway, transit and road expansions.

Regulators want refinery to fix boiler

by Henry K. Lee

S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, February 24, 2005

Bay Area air-quality regulators sought an order Wednesday forcing the Tesoro refinery to fix a boiler that has emitted soot three times over the past year.

A boiler at the Golden Eagle Refinery spewed particulates on Jan. 12, 2005, Oct. 30, 2004 and July 4, 2004, according to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. The same boiler has had a history of problems since 1992, said air district spokeswoman Luna Salaver.

The district asked a hearing board Wednesday to issue a conditional order that would require Tesoro to upgrade its equipment to prevent further emissions.

Tesoro spokesman Jon Ballesteros said the company recognized the need to operate the refinery "safely and in an environmentally responsible manner" and is working to address the situation.

Lifestyle Bills Start Legislative Makeover

Democrats hope quality of life proposals will improve the public's opinion of lawmakers.

By Jordan Rau

Los Angeles Times, February 24, 2005

SACRAMENTO - Democrats in the Legislature on Wednesday unveiled a package of proposals designed to help curtail urban sprawl, mushrooming housing prices and ever-expanding commuting times.

The proposals are the centerpiece of Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata's strategy of addressing quality of life issues for middle-class voters and presenting the Legislature as a pragmatic body to an electorate that dislikes it.

"Right now, nearly one in five Californians can't afford a home," the Alameda lawmaker said at a news conference. "People are now spending more time commuting to and from work than they are spending with their own families. People are finding it's getting harder and harder to maintain the middle-class lifestyle."

The measures are intended to encourage the construction of affordable, high-density housing in urban areas near transportation hubs and in already developed areas of cities.

The approach hinges on tax incentives and less regulation to make such projects easier to build, while discouraging local governments from challenging such projects because of community opposition.

The Democratic approach risks annoying local leaders who have resented efforts by Sacramento to dictate zoning rules. It also offers an urban lifestyle model to which not all Californians may subscribe.

"They think if you build all these high-density houses, people are going to flock to them," said Senate GOP Leader Dick Ackerman of Irvine. "Most people do not want to live in downtown San Francisco or downtown L.A."

Perata is trying to improve the Legislature's public image at a time when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has launched broad proposals that would reduce the body's power to set state spending and determine the districts where lawmakers run for election. Schwarzenegger has threatened to put both topics before voters in a special election this year if lawmakers do not go along with his proposals.

"I think the governor is well served by picking a fight with us . . .," Perata said last week. "He's very popular and we're not."

A survey released Wednesday by the Field Poll found that only 36% of Californians approve of the Legislature. Though dismal, that rating was a substantial improvement over the esteem lawmakers were held in just before the recall that elected Schwarzenegger. In July 2003, the Legislature's public approval rating was 19%.

But Schwarzenegger's popularity has been declining. The Field Poll found that the governor's approval rating had dropped 10 percentage points since September, to 55%.

Perata and other Democrats believe that the Legislature can continue to close the popularity gap if lawmakers can show the public that they are not obstructionists, and that their concerns are broader than the party's traditional focus on social services and such topics as driver's licenses for illegal immigrants.

The measures offered Wednesday would:

- . Exempt some housing projects in urban areas from the environmental impact reports required by the California Environmental Quality Act. In cities with at least 200,000 residents, SB 832, sponsored by Perata, would allow cities to exempt housing projects on sites of up to 10 acres with up to 300 residential units.

- . Strengthen the state's anti-NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) laws to make it harder for foes of affordable-housing projects to block them. SB 575 by Sen. Tom Torlakson of Antioch would tighten the circumstances under which a local government could deny an affordable-housing development, and would make it easier for developers to win monetary damages if they were wrongly rejected.

- . Allow redevelopment agencies to offer special financing for high-density projects around or near transit stations (SB 521 by Torlakson).

- . Require local governments to address air pollution and incorporate solutions to bad air into general development plans. The approach has been in place in the Central Valley for two years. SB 44 by Sen. Christine Kehoe of San Diego would expand the approach statewide.

Democrats devised their proposals in consultation with transportation, housing, environmental and local government groups, many of which offered positive assessments of the effort.

But they also raised questions about the costs to the state, which the Democrats did not even try to estimate.

"It's very encouraging," said Megan Taylor, communications director of the League of California Cities. "From the city perspective, one of the things that's terribly important is that there be some means of paying for the additional services that would be required as you bring in more people."

Bill Magavern, a lobbyist for Sierra Club California, said Perata's approach is "a very important part of a smart-growth strategy." But he predicted that developers would press hard to reduce environmental regulations for housing outside urban areas.

The governor has expressed concern about housing costs and long commutes. "We need roads and we need affordable housing," he said in his State of the State address last month. "The median price of a home in California is \$460,000. That is too much. A home of your own is part of the American Dream. I believe in such dreams, so I will propose legislation that eliminates regulatory and legal hurdles that delay construction and increase the costs of new housing."

He has not yet introduced the specifics of such legislation. Schwarzenegger's secretary of the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency, Sunne Wright McPeak, plans to devise them after consulting with developers, housing advocates and others.

The governor's office said aides had not yet reviewed the Democratic bills and could not assess them.

Dems offer traffic, housing solutions **Senators' proposals urge development in urbanized areas**

John M. Hubbell, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau

Thursday, February 24, 2005

Sacramento -- Democratic state senators, seeking to offer an alternative to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's agenda, introduced a package of bills they said targets root causes of two signature California woes -- traffic jams and spiraling home costs.

The four bills by Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, and Sens. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, and Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, view the encouragement of development in already urbanized areas -- especially near transit hubs -- as a key deterrent to runaway sprawl, which in turn adds to the clogging of already overburdened freeways and increased pollution.

The senators said they view "infill" urban growth as the smartest avenue to increase affordable housing in California and decrease traffic congestion. The median price for a house in the nine-county Bay Area is \$556,000, and commutes in the region rank among the nation's worst.

Urban development could trump suburban sprawl, they said, if the approval processes for projects is streamlined among city and regional authorities and a degree of lenience is allowed in adhering to state environmental standards in large cities.

Among other things, the bills introduced Wednesday also seek to:

- Strengthen laws that allow affordable, typically high-density housing to be built in the face of community opposition;
- Offer financial incentives for builders to develop high-density projects near transit hubs; and
- Require local governments to adopt air quality considerations in their general plans to ensure development reduces air pollution.

Some themes in the bills echo Schwarzenegger's State of the State address, in which he called for the state to take a more cohesive approach to development. The governor's own proposals

are not expected for at least a few more weeks, Patrick Dorinson, spokesman for Transportation and Housing Secretary Sunne Wright McPeak, said Wednesday.

Perata said he feels "it will be a matter of common agreement" between Schwarzenegger and Democrats that housing and transportation issues should be tackled broadly during the legislative term.

Already, however, there is disagreement over Schwarzenegger's budget plan, which calls for the continued redirecting of fuel taxes away from the funding of road projects that voters mandated by passing Proposition 42.

Anti-sprawl proposal unveiled

State Democratic leaders pushing urban planning to save farms, cut home costs

By ERIC STERNBEE CAPITOL BUREAU

Modesto Bee, Thursday, Feb. 24, 2005

SACRAMENTO - Squeezing more homes and apartments into the Bay Area would protect farmland, clean the air and help parents spend more time with their children, state Senate Democratic leaders said Wednesday.

Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata and other Democrats unveiled a series of proposals with the ultimate goal of lowering home prices. They want to increase the housing supply in the high-demand, urban centers of San Francisco and Los Angeles - and contain the fallout from sprawl.

The median home-sale price in the state was \$474,000 in December, pushing 80 percent of Californians out of the market, Perata said.

The proposal - influenced by months of talks among home builders, environmental groups, planners and California League of Cities officials - emphasizes "infill" development by relying on streets and sewer lines in existing neighborhoods, instead of growing farther out.

The legislators want to remove environmental restrictions and provide extra road and transit dollars to cities that agree to pack in more housing.

They say not-in-my-back-yard opponents of dense housing have helped push development onto farmland where protests aren't as intense, driving up prices of the limited housing closer to San Francisco and Los Angeles.

"What we have seen with unconstrained growth over the last number of decades in California is that we've just gobbled up far too much rich agricultural lands," Perata said, adding that it has led to traffic and taken a toll on families.

"How ... can you be involved (as a parent) if you're sitting there staring at your speedometer for two hours a day?" Perata asked. "That's what's at stake here."

Many details remain to be worked out, including where to find money to prod city planners to follow the state's lead and how wide an area to label infill.

Karen Douglas, acting executive director of the Planning and Conservation League, an environmental group, said it's critical to keep infill narrowly defined to true urban centers.

Perata was taking a looser approach Wednesday.

"Today, infill in my area probably goes through the Altamont Pass and probably beyond that, which is Tracy and Livingston and things like that," according to Perata, who represents the Oakland area.

The most controversial element of the plan targets the state's landmark environmental law. The 35-year-old California Environmental Quality Act requires planners to study how new construction projects would affect air, water and wildlife, and arrange for ways to offset the consequences.

10-year planning on table

Perata said he would not gut the CEQA, but would eliminate a project-by-project environmental review for cities that map out growth for 10 years and study the environmental impacts up front. Another proposal would ease the environmental review process for certain housing projects in cities of more than 200,000 people.

Environmentalists have expressed concern that while the plan might be aimed at building more apartments, say in Oakland, it could expedite development on farmland on the outskirts of Central Valley cities like Modesto, Stockton, Sacramento and Fresno.

Gov. Schwarzenegger, who called homeownership part of the American dream in his State of the State address, is expected to put forth his own plans soon.

In his speech last month, Schwarzenegger bemoaned long commutes that many homeowners face and said he will push to eliminate the "regulatory and legal hurdles that delay construction and increase the costs of new housing."

"We're as anxious as anybody to see what his proposals are," said Assemblyman Dave Cogdill, R-Modesto, who has been tapped to shepherd Schwarzenegger's housing plan through the Legislature.

Cogdill said many of the themes will mirror Perata's legislation, such as encouraging infill development and protecting prime farmland.

"There may be something that ultimately gets melded into one bill," Cogdill said.

State regulators help Amtrak clean the air

by Chris Bowman - Bee Staff writer

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, Feb. 24, 2005

California air pollution regulators on Wednesday took a step toward bridging the enormous disparity in emission controls between vehicles on the road and those on the rail.

The officials did not adopt any new rules. Rather, they provided \$150,000 in public money to have Amtrak install soot-and-smog controls sooner than required on two locomotives that run between Oakland and Bakersfield.

In Northern California, the biggest beneficiaries are the estimated 20,000 people who breathe elevated levels of diesel pollution because they live right next to the Capitol Corridor commuter line, between Oakland and Sacramento, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

They include mobile home residents on Olive Drive in Davis, where officials of the EPA and other agencies boarded Amtrak's 522 train to Sacramento on Wednesday to publicly announce the federal clean-diesel grant.

They spoke on that platform of the Sacramento station over the rumble and within the exhaust plume of the train's 16-cylinder, 3,200 horsepower engine.

Wayne Natri, EPA's California regional administrator, said the grant would help the smoggy Sacramento area "achieve clean air faster."

Diesel exhaust contains tiny particles that can lodge in the lungs and promote lung cancer, trigger asthma attacks and worsen emphysema and other respiratory disease.

Recent studies have shown that the ultra-fine particles from fuel combustion can filter beyond the lungs and into the blood and trigger heart attacks.

"The more we learn, the worse it looks," said Jerry Martin, spokesman for the state Air Resources Board.

More diesel is consumed in rail transportation than in any other industry in the country, including trucking, said John Bromley, spokesman for Union Pacific Railroad.

Though locomotives spew far more pollution than trucks, their giant engines have escaped most of the pollution controls applied to passenger vehicles, buses and trucks and polluting businesses.

The Bush administration's "nonroad diesel rule" signed last May to clean up emissions from industrial and agricultural equipment won't affect locomotives until 2014.

"That time scale doesn't meet our needs," said Larry Greene, executive officer of the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, which applied for the EPA grant.

Local air districts control pollution from businesses but have no authority over vehicles, let alone locomotives, ships and airplanes - all within the purview of the federal environmental agency.

As a result, Sacramento air district officials shop around for federal and state money to subsidize the purchase of pollution control devices or cleaner engines.

The Amtrak locomotives will be retrofitted this summer on the generators that run the lights, heat and air conditioning on the cars, said Tim Taylor, spokesman for Cleaire, a San Leandro company that manufactures the emission controls.

The Sacramento air district figures that the locomotive controls will spare the region about 220 tons of diesel air pollutants in the 30-year life span of the two engines. The emissions are the equivalent of those from eight diesel-powered big-rig trucks every day for 30 years, according to the state air board.

Senate leaders unveil legislation targeting sprawl, congestion

By JIM WASSERMAN, Associated Press Writer

S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, February 23, 2005

(SACRAMENTO, (AP) -- State Senate leaders unveiled a package of bills Wednesday to steer more development to overlooked city land in an effort to curb some of the nation's worst traffic congestion, air pollution and sprawl.

Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, said the four-bill package aims to spur housing in a state where only one in five residents can afford a median-priced home, which now costs \$475,000.

Perata outlined bills to make cities incorporate clean air improvements into long range plans, stimulate housing near transit stations and limit environmental challenges to downtown and inner-city development.

"These are all recycled ideas," Perata said.

The Senate leader chronicled a litany of ills that have accompanied the state's rapid growth to nearly 37 million residents, including unaffordable homes, long work commutes and smog.

"We may well be the first generation that will not be able to pass on a better lifestyle or the quality of life living conditions to our children that we had ourselves," he said.

Perata said the bills stem from talks among builders, environmentalists and representatives of cities and counties, although all the groups do not agree on the ideas. He called them a framework for more negotiations and pledged they would move quickly through the Senate.

Late last year, Perata said growth and California's quality of life would top the Senate's agenda during the two-year legislative session that began last month.

Specifically, the bills more than double the eligible acreage allowed in central-city zones to avoid environmental reviews and triple the number of housing units exempted. Presently, only projects under 4 acres and less than 100 housing units can avoid California Environmental Quality Act reviews that sometimes subject projects to delaying actions and lawsuits by opponents.

Sen. Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, one of the bill's co-authors and chairman of the Senate Environmental Quality Committee, said they did not plan to gut the state's environmental act.

Other bills would make it harder for opponents to derail affordable housing projects in cities and allow redevelopment agencies to steer tax funds to high-density housing projects near transit stations.

[Modesto Bee editorial, Thursday, Feb. 24, 2005:](#)

StaRT's proposed fare hike is necessary and reasonable

No one likes higher prices, but the proposed fee increases for Stanislaus County buses appear reasonable given rising expenses and the fact the last fare increase was two years ago.

Only a few people have shown up at public meetings on the subject. That suggests riders aren't aware of the proposal, think it's reasonable or won't complain until it goes into effect. That will be July 1, if the Board of Supervisors approves.

The county's transit system, Stanislaus Regional Transit (StaRT), has a somewhat complicated list of fees, but the basics are this: The proposal is to raise the standard fare from 85 cents to \$1 for most adults and from 60 cents to 75 cents for seniors and the disabled. The transfer fee would remain 25 cents; this allows riders to transfer to Modesto Area Express and other city systems. The \$1 fare is comparable to what is charged in many counties and lower than SanJoaquin County's \$1.25.

Brad Christian, county transit manager, said the fee increase is needed to keep fares covering 10 percent of total operating costs. Most of the remainder is paid by the state. Christian hopes fares won't need to go up for at least another two years.

We hope so, too. Public transit is an essential service. It helps people who, for whatever reason, cannot drive, and it helps the community as a whole by reducing air pollution. StaRT is especially notable in that regard because its buses operate on clean-burning compressed natural gas.

As well as fixed-route and dial-a-ride services, Stanislaus County operates a medivan that transports people to Bay Area medical appointments. The roundtrip fare is \$12, proposed to go to \$15, but we still think it's a good deal. Patients can pay that much just to park in the Bay Area. Pre-registration and prepayment is needed for the medivan; call 800-262-1516 for information. There are no age or other restrictions on using the medivan.

A public hearing on fare increase is tentatively set for April 19 before the Board of Supervisors.