

Pollution board sets town hall talks to clear the air

Valley traffic worst offend, but fix can't ride on roads

By MARK GROSSI - THE FRESNO BEE

In the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 25, 2006

The air wasn't healthy for even one summer in the San Joaquin Valley under the old federal smog standard.

That yardstick went away a few years ago, and now a far tougher one is in place. More than half the pollution in the valley's air may have to be trimmed to meet a 2013 cleanup deadline.

"It's a tough challenge," said Rick McVaigh, second in command at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "We might have to reduce as much as 60 percent of our (pollution emissions)."

The time has come to ask for help from everyone, district leaders said.

The district is inviting the public to a series of Air Quality Town Hall meetings this week. The six meetings start Wednesday in Bakersfield and Delano. They will move to Fresno and Huron on Thursday, finishing with Modesto and Stockton on Friday.

The idea is to hear pollution-reduction ideas from people and to tell them how tough the task will be. The job is so monumental that officials sometimes say the area wouldn't reach the clean-air goal even if all valley businesses were shut down. They emphasize that no one is seriously suggesting shutting down businesses.

At the town hall meetings, officials will describe the air problem: This 25,000-square-mile valley is a bowl of hot, trapped gases in summer and moist, chemical-laced particles in winter.

The bowl geography and stagnant air tend to magnify the valley's pollution because the bad air hangs around for days.

The biggest villains are cars and trucks, accounting more than half of the air quality problem. The California Air Resources Board estimates vehicles in the valley travel 107.7 million miles daily.

But the local district does not have authority over vehicles. State and federal governments regulate cars, trucks, boats, trains and planes. Cleaner-burning fuels and engines are expected to begin making a difference in the next few years.

"We will need emissions reductions from sources regulated by the state and federal governments," McVaigh said.

AT A GLANCE

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will host six meetings throughout the district:

Bakersfield: Wednesday, 1 to 4 p.m., air district office

Delano: Wednesday, 7 to 10 p.m., César Chávez High School

Fresno: Thursday, 1 to 4 p.m., air district office

Huron: Thursday, 7 to 10 p.m., Huron Middle School

Modesto: Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, air district offices, 4800 Enterprise Way

Stockton: Friday, 2:30 to 5:30 p.m., San Joaquin County Council of Governments office, 555 E. Webber Ave.

More information is available at www.valleyair.org/Town_Hall/Town_Hall_Meetings.htm.

Forces keep California dairy industry moving

Bob Krauter, Capital Press California Editor

Capital Press Weekly Friday, July 21, 2006

Cows are not the only ones feeling a squeeze at dairies these days. Increased regulations, pressures from urbanization and sour milk prices are prompting some California dairy farmers to sell out, expand or hoof it out of state.

Tim Leach, director of marketing and a dairy specialist for Fresno-Madera Farm Credit, said a number of

converging forces are bearing down on dairy farmers: low milk prices, urbanization in Southern California and in the Central Valley and new air and water quality rules.

"They basically encompass the entire San Joaquin Valley here on trying to get the federal, state and local governments on the same page with issues relating to air and water quality," Leach said. "It's been a long process as different counties try to write environmental impact reports concerning all of those issues, it becomes quite complex in trying to match up all of the different interest groups and what they require of those issues in terms of emissions, water, air, nutrient management and other issues."

Leach said more dairies are up for sale in the San Joaquin Valley.

"That's happening. It is really happening if you are milking 500 cows and less. What people are seeing is that the permit to milk those 500 cows, because of environmental issues, they've already got the permit and it is in place and that permit is transferable so in most cases, the larger dairy producer can see the value of having that permit, especially if the permittee has done some things that would help already to comply with regional water and air quality issues."

Leach said the trend of smaller dairies being bought up by larger ones is likely to continue a trend of consolidation in California's dairy industry.

"We will see that trend continue as we stay down in this low \$10-plus milk. The average ... is around 1,000 cows per dairy across California and I think the number is going to creep up,"

Leach said. "You are going to see fewer dairies and they are going to be larger."

As consolidation continues in the San Joaquin Valley, so too is the exodus of dairies from Southern California's Chino Basin. But instead of relocating to the Central Valley, Leach said farmers to looking out of state.

"Southern California dairies have been pushed out as the cost of land has skyrocketed for housing and they are looking where to move and some have chosen to move here to the Central Valley and some have chosen to move out of state," Leach said. "Almost any state you can name, there's people looking at areas to start a dairy business."

Michael Marsh, president of Western United Dairyman in Modesto, said the industry is one of its cyclical phases when milk prices have soured.

"Unfortunately what we see at the same time, is an ever-more highly regulated environment to do business in the state of California," Marsh said. "So if someone is contemplating expanding his or her operation and looking for a transition, they may be looking to take their California dollars and invest them in another state that is not so heavily encumbered by regulation."

Selma dairy farmer Steve Nash said a typical environmental impact report in California can cost from \$150,000 to \$200,000 to gain approval for a new dairy. When added to the escalating cost of land in the state, it creates an incentive for farmers to look elsewhere.

"It is not surprising to see farmers move when you can go out of state and find land for one-third less and where an EIR can run \$50,000 or less," Nash said.

Michael Marsh, who recently returned from a trip to see dairies in Scandinavian countries, said California's dairy industry, "without a doubt, is the most heavily regulated anywhere in the world." He said dairy farmers who once viewed their primary job as milking cows are now having to shuffle paper associated with an increased load of environmental regulations.

"This is paper they wouldn't have to shuffle if they were in Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, New Mexico, Texas or anywhere else," Marsh said. "It begs the question: Are we going to regulate ourselves out of competition and not be competitive with the rest of the world?"

While he acknowledged the decision to pick up and move a dairy out of California is difficult, Marsh said the pressures dairy farmers face is considerable and growing.

"Keeping the dairy families in the state of California will become increasingly difficult because of the regulatory and litigious environment we find ourselves in."

Deadly heat tightens grip

Swelter a possible factor in 10 Fresno Co. deaths.

By Christina Vance and Matt Leedy

The Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 25, 2006

A crippling five-day heat wave may have contributed to 10 deaths in Fresno County as it sickened dozens of people and caused power outages across the region.

Fresno's high was 113 degrees Monday, breaking the record for that date of 111 degrees set in 1906, National Weather Service records said. Monday marked the third straight daily high of 110 or more. Thursday and Friday reached 109 degrees.

The weekend heat also marked an all-time nighttime temperature record for Fresno. The temperature didn't dip below 90 degrees overnight Sunday, the highest low temperature recorded for that date since record-keeping began in the 1880s.

The previous record was 86 degrees, set in 1908.

Fresno County Coroner Loralee Cervantes said Monday her office has only confirmed two of the deaths as heat-related, despite reports Sunday from Fresno police and a doctor from University Medical Center that three people had died from heat-related illness.

It's very possible, Cervantes said, that tests will confirm more deaths stemmed from the high temperatures.

After someone dies, authorities have a short window of time - up to 48 hours or before a body reaches an "advanced" stage of decomposition - to draw fluid that can reveal whether heat played a role in the death. Because of that limitation, Cervantes said, coroner's officials were only able to draw fluid from about five of the other people whose deaths could be linked to the heat.

The fluids, sent to a lab in Tulare, could take about a week to yield results.

Cervantes said coroner's investigators found many others dead inside their homes with only fans running. Most of them were in their 60s and 70s and may have had health problems.

"We can't confirm they're heat-related, but it's certainly a major component," she said.

Cervantes said the deceased were in their homes "collapsed in doorways and kitchens and bedrooms and living rooms."

"The fans, all they're doing is moving around the hot air," she said.

Family members of one of the people who died said they couldn't afford to use air conditioning even though they had it, Cervantes said. Another man didn't turn on his air conditioner because he had mental health issues and the noise scared him, Cervantes said.

The Coroner's Office did not release details about the men who were confirmed heat-related deaths.

One is a man in his 50s - a UMC doctor reported he was 56 - who died Saturday after drinking alcohol outside the Fresno Rescue Mission. The other, an unidentified man who appeared to be in his 40s, was found about 4 p.m. Sunday in the grass at Huntington Boulevard and Callisch Street. That's about the time Fresno temperatures reached the day's high of 113 degrees.

"He'd been lying there for about an hour," Deputy Coroner Amy Hance said.

Fresno County's first heat-related death of the summer may have occurred Thursday. The State Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board announced Monday it is investigating a Kerman work site death.

Benadino Gomez, a 49-year-old employee of Valley Pool Plastering in Fresno, died after working in 109-degree weather, according to the Cal/OSHA. He had worked for the company for four years.

Thirteen workers died of heat-related causes in California in 2005, and Cal/OSHA spokesman Dean Fryer said Gomez's death prompted the agency's second investigation of a possible heat-linked death this year.

The agency also is investigating last week's death of a Bakersfield lawn service worker who had been on the job for three days.

Fryer said outdoor workers generally take four to 14 days to adjust to working in high temperatures. He said 80% of the workers who died or became sick from heat last year had been on the job four days or less.

But heat sickness wasn't limited to outdoor workers. More than 60 people complaining of heat-related problems visited University Medical Center and Community Regional Medical Center during the weekend, spokeswoman Mary Lisa Russell said. She said some of the visits could have been prompted by medical conditions aggravated by heat.

The people who came to the hospital were suffering anything from low fever and nausea to a few cases of severe heat stroke, Dr. Gene Kallsen said Monday.

"The influx of patients has really only begun the last couple of days," he said.

The Fresno County deaths are among at least 29 possible heat-related deaths statewide, most in the Central Valley.

Kern County Coroner John Van Rensselaer said a woman collapsed and died while walking a half-mile from her home to a drugstore in Ridgecrest, not far from Death Valley National Park, where the mercury peaked at 125 degrees Sunday.

Meanwhile, state officials were investigating a Stockton nursing home for possible negligence after a patient died when the air conditioner gave out in 115-degree weather.

The severity of the Valley heat wave and the heat-related deaths prompted Fresno Mayor Alan Autry to make it easier for Fresnoans and Fresno County residents to cool off.

"There's only one way to describe it - killer heat," Autry said. "When something like this happens, you use every resource you have to help."

Fresnoans who need relief from the heat can call (559) 621-HEAT (4328) to get a ride to an air-conditioned community center. A Handy Ride vehicle or a taxi will take them to and from the closest center.

Autry also has 14 city buses ready to help county residents in unincorporated areas. The buses will be sent to places where people need to cool off but aren't close enough to air conditioned public centers.

People will be allowed to sit in the parked buses, which will have engines and air conditioners running.

The low-emission buses are fueled by compressed natural gas, so air district officials say they have little concerns about the buses idling for long periods of time.

"People's health is much more important than the minor amounts of emission produced from these clean vehicles," said Jaime Holt, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

City and county officials are discussing where the buses should be sent.

Meanwhile, thousands in Fresno were left to fend for themselves without power Monday. Shortly before 10 p.m., 6,700 customers were without electricity, according to Pacific Gas & Electric Co. spokeswoman Mariana Hernandez.

The largest outages of the day, Hernandez said, occurred in northwest Fresno. The two largest both struck at 3:30 p.m., she said. One involved 2,600 customers in the area bordered by Ashlan and Herndon avenues and by Van Ness Boulevard and Fruit Avenue. The other, between

Brawley and Fruit avenues and south of Bullard Avenue, left 2,300 without power.

The Kings County Government Center on Lacey Boulevard in Hanford switched to its backup generator at 3 p.m. to help conserve energy. Harry Verheul, Kings County public works director, said Southern California Edison offered a cheaper rate if the county curtailed usage.

He did not know how long offices would rely on the generator but expected the county would be asked to do the same today.

Fresno County Administrative Officer Bart Bohn said precautions such as the city buses will be helpful when outages occur. The county also is developing plans to extend hours at libraries and community centers.

County officials asked Dr. Pete Mehas, Fresno County's Superintendent of Schools, to have campus cafeterias and auditoriums opened to people without air conditioning.

Fresno Unified School District has made three elementary schools available for people who need a cool place during the hottest hours. Multi-purpose rooms will be available from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. at Rowell Elementary (3460 E. McKenzie Ave.), Slater Elementary (4472 N. Emerson Ave.) and Storey Elementary (5250 E. Church Ave.)

Security workers will be at the schools and bottled water will be available.

Additional schools could be opened if they are needed, said Erin Kennedy, a Fresno Unified spokeswoman.

National Weather Service meteorologist Kevin Durfee said forecasts predicted high temperatures at 100 degrees or above for the rest of the week.

Durfee said the heat isn't likely to let up until there's something strong enough to dislodge the ridge of high pressure causing a lot of the misery.

"It's kind of like a big mountain, and it's hard to move a big mountain of hot air," he said.

Still, Fresno residents can look forward to a slight cooling trend as the week goes on, according to forecasts.

"That 103 degrees at the end of the week sounds very refreshing," Durfee said. "I don't think I've ever said that before."

Phew!

Power use soars -- California barely dodges rolling blackouts

Heat clings to the Bay Area -- cooling fog is on the way

Energy crunch: State has added only 6,774 megawatts since '01

By David R. Baker, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, July 25, 2006

The 36 power plants California has built since its energy crisis five years ago helped keep the state from plunging into blackouts Monday as this month's record heat wave pushed power usage to a new high.

But the state didn't have much juice to spare.

Ever since blackouts rippled across the state in 2001, California has been building power plants and beefing up transmission lines to prevent another energy crisis.

The spate of construction was supposed to keep the energy flowing in the near future with a reasonable margin of safety. Instead, experts say we've been pushed to the brink of blackouts by:

- A slowdown in construction of power plants;
- Growth in the state's broiling Central Valley, where new homes and their air conditioners are gulping power;
- The lack of real-time pricing, which would force businesses and other consumers to pay more when electricity demand is highest;
- And -- last but not least -- very, very hot weather.

That last factor, as obvious as it may seem, has played a huge role in bringing the state to the edge of an emergency. Under normal July temperatures, customers of the state's three investor-owned utilities probably would be using about 46,000 megawatts of power in the afternoons, according to managers of California's grid.

Instead, they used 50,269 megawatts Monday. The prediction is that they will need 50,538 today. Each megawatt typically powers about 750 homes.

The California Independent System Operator, which runs the grid, plans for heat waves as well as ordinary temperatures. The organization expects demand this year to rise far above 48,000 megawatts. Temperatures this month have risen higher and stayed high longer than anyone predicted.

"It's largely because of freak weather," said Frank Wolak, a Stanford University economics professor who chairs the power market surveillance committee for the System Operator.

The unusual conditions have tested the state's new power plants.

Since the start of 2001, California has opened plants capable of generating 12,908 megawatts of electricity, according to the California Energy Commission. During that time, however, it has lost older plants that had reached the end of their useful lives, costing more to run and in many cases spewing more air pollution than newer facilities. Closing those plants, including the aging Pacific Gas and Electric Co. facility in San Francisco's Hunters Point neighborhood, cost the state 6,134 megawatts.

In other words, the state's grid has gained just 6,774 megawatts overall.

In addition, the pace of approving new plants has slowed. Energy regulators approved 23 new plants in 2001, at the height of the crisis. In 2004, that number had fallen to eight, and last year just two projects were approved. None has been approved so far this year. And not all of the plants approved since the crisis have been built.

Matt Freedman, with The Utility Reform Network consumer watchdog group, said construction has lost momentum because, in California's post-deregulation power market, it's not clear who will pay for new plants. Commercial power plant companies can't get financing for the projects unless they sign long-term contracts, in advance, with the utilities, which may be able to buy cheaper power elsewhere.

"People ask, what are we doing to get more generation? Well, the question is, who's 'we'? " Freedman said.

Some energy economists, however, consider the focus on new power plants misguided. Rather, they say the state needs to create incentives for customers to cut power use when demand starts soaring. Californians, acting on a voluntary basis, cut about 1,400 megawatts during the weekend, a number state officials badly want to increase.

Build enough power plants to deal with the hottest weather, economists say, and they could end up barely used during cooler years.

"You wouldn't want to design the system for the weather we're having today," Wolak said. "It's expensive to build these power plants, and we'd prefer them not to be idle most of the time."

Wolak and others want to see some type of real-time pricing. Instead of paying flat, pre-set rates, consumers would pay more for power when the market price rises and less when it falls.

Large power customers and some homeowners already pay different rates based on the time of day power is consumed. But Severin Borenstein, director of the University of California Energy Institute, said time-of-use rates aren't as effective at curbing a customer's appetite for energy as real-time pricing.

"We're not talking about shutting people off," he said. "We're talking about very incremental conservation measures that people will take when they have an economic incentive."

Although Californians have shown an ability to conserve during a crisis, the willingness to pitch in eventually fades as the emergency recedes, Borenstein said.

"You get crisis fatigue after awhile," he said. "People just want to turn on the air conditioner."

Energy alerts

The state's power grid operator reported a record peak demand of 50,269 megawatts Monday, breaking the record of 49,036 megawatts set on Friday. The state's power grid operators declared a Stage 2 energy alert but managed to avoid rolling blackouts.

Here is an explanation of the emergency alerts used by state power officials:

-- Stage 1 is declared when reserves are projected to fall below 6 and 7 percent and prompts requests for additional energy conservation. A Stage 1 alert was called at 10 a.m.

-- Stage 2 is declared when reserves are projected to fall below 5 percent. At this stage, interruption of services to some or all selected customers is required. Selected customers are those who have agreed in advance to receive a reduced rate in return for their agreement to have their services interrupted. A Stage 2 alert was called at 1:30 for only the fourth time since the 2000-2001 energy crisis.

-- Stage 3 is declared when reserves are projected to fall below 1.5 percent. Rolling blackouts can be called to avoid total collapse of the state power grid. The state has not had rolling blackouts since 2001

Scientists split on heat wave cause

Some think culprit is global warming, but jury is still out

By Keay Davidson, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, July 25, 2006

In the past, most weather experts hesitated to blame short-term weather events -- say, a terrible winter storm or a nasty heat wave -- on longer-scale climate shifts like global warming.

But this week -- as many Bay Area residents flee to air-conditioned theaters to watch Al Gore's global warming film, "An Inconvenient Truth" -- the latest sweltering weather is starting to look to many like a calling card of global warming.

Some of the nation's top climate experts also believe the heat wave is caused at least partly by global climate change. Others, however, disagree and say it's still too early to blame the current weather on the planet's changing climate.

How hot is it? The first six months of 2006 were the warmest of any year in the United States since record keeping began in 1895, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Climatic Data Center. In Northern California, the weather has been hot enough to drain power supplies, dry up streams and contribute to several deaths.

"I think there are very good reasons to believe that the current U.S. heat wave is at least partly caused by global warming," Kevin Trenberth, one of the nation's top global-warming computer modelers, wrote in an e-mail.

In recent years, studies by several scientific teams show that "the frequency of cold nights dropped everywhere, and warm nights increased everywhere" around the world, said Trenberth, a scientist for the Climate Analysis Section of the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colo. "Heat waves have also increased most places around the world."

A noted atmospheric scientist and climate modeler, Govindasamy Bala of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, agreed.

"It is true that the current heat wave could have occurred by chance. But I believe that the likelihood of such occurrences increases due to global warming," Bala said.

Yet there are doubters -- for example, James O'Brien, Florida's state climatologist.

O'Brien criticized colleagues who he thinks are too quick to link short-term and long-term weather. He recalled that in 1988, "we had a big Midwest heat wave ... which (NASA scientist) Jim Hansen told the U.S. Senate was due to global warming." Instead, O'Brien said, the heat wave was caused by high sea-surface temperatures in the tropical Pacific.

Likewise, he said, during another recent heat wave, "they said that many people died in Chicago due to this global warming. In fact, it was due to old, poor people not being advised about (how to survive) the heat wave."

Also cautious is Philip Klotzbach, an atmospheric scientist at Colorado State University: "Heat waves have happened for many years (i.e., the Dust Bowl in the 1930s), so to say that this one particular event is caused by global warming is really impossible," he wrote in an e-mail.

Chris Field, director of the Department of Global Ecology at the Carnegie Institution of Washington's branch at Stanford University, said scientists can't attribute singular weather events to global warming. But many studies conclude that heat waves tend to get hotter as the planet warms.

"This week's heat wave might or might not have occurred without global warming, but it is a good bet that heat waves will be hotter and more frequent in the warmer world," Field said.

Michael Mann, a leading global warming expert at Pennsylvania State University, agreed, saying climate change is "stacking the deck" and making heat waves more likely.

"As we see more and more such record-breaking extremes," Mann said, "we can increasingly implicate climate change for the shift. This holds for heat waves, droughts and intense tropical storms."

One thing that scientists tend to agree on is an expectation of more extreme weather as global warming continues.

"What is worrisome," said Claudia Tebaldi, a climate statistician who works at the Boulder research center, "is that climate models all agree on the intensification of heat waves in the future."

What about that Wal-Mart plan

By LESLIE ALBRECHT - MERCED SUN-STAR
In the Modesto Bee, Tuesday, July 25, 2006

MERCED - Concerned about what 900 trucks driving in and out of the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center would do to Merced's air quality?

The city wants to hear from you.

City planners will have two public meetings Thursday to hear from residents about which concerns should be studied in the environmental impact report about the proposed 1.2 million-square-foot Wal-Mart distribution center.

"People might have lots of questions, but they should be aware of the fact that we're not going to have answers to those questions," Planning Manager Kim Espinosa said. "We're just looking for the questions so we can prepare the answers."

The answers will be ready in January 2007, when consulting group EDAW Inc. is slated to finish the environmental impact report.

The City Council approved EDAW's \$344,655 consulting contract in May. Wal-Mart will pay for the entire project.

State environmental laws require impact reports for large projects such as the distribution center. The proposed Wal-Mart center would cover an area the size of 250 football fields between Childs and Gerard avenues, west of Tower Road.

It would operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Residents who live in the area are worried about how the center would affect traffic, noise and property values, said Joel Knox, chairman of the Golden Valley Neighborhood Association.

Debate about what kind of jobs the distribution center would provide has been a hot topic in recent months, but economic issues won't be discussed at the Thursday meetings, Espinosa said.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT: Two public meetings about what should be studied in the environmental impact report for the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center.

WHEN: 2:30 and 6 p.m. Thursday

WHO: The afternoon meeting is for state and local government agencies and the public. The evening meeting is for the public.

WHERE: City Council chamber, 678 W. 18th St., Merced

Import firm dreams big about tiny cars

High gas prices may boost market

By Clint Swett -- Bee Staff Writer
Sacramento Bee, Sunday, July 23, 2006

SANTA ROSA - In a window-clad showroom on a busy downtown corner here, the future of U.S. motoring could be on display.

Scattered across the polished linoleum floor of the ZAP auto distributorship are brightly painted "micro-cars" with names like Smart, Xebra and Obvio.

All carry two people, get extraordinary mileage and park in spaces not much bigger than a desk.

Steve Schneider, who broke into the auto industry working at a Renault dealership two decades ago, is chief executive of ZAP (Zero Air Pollution), a publicly traded company that imports these pint-size cars into the United States.

He's convinced a confluence of events -- soaring gas prices, unrelenting turmoil in the Mideast and increasing fears of global warming -- means Americans are ready for the miniature, environmentally friendly runabouts.

It's "an untapped market that is phenomenal," Schneider said.

Indeed, micro-cars, which are generally half the length of a beefy Chevy Tahoe SUV, are ubiquitous in Europe and Asia, where stratospheric gas prices and crowded streets make them highly practical.

But among American drivers, with access to relatively cheap gas and a love for brawny vehicles and the open road, the tiny cars have never caught on.

That could change soon, experts say. The Smart car, for one, could become a big U.S. seller when its manufacturer, DaimlerChrysler, begins importing it in 2008 at a price expected to be less than \$15,000.

"It appears there's a significant market for micro-cars," said Philip Reed, consumer editor for the automotive Web site Edmunds.com. "People are really frustrated with high gas prices."

David Anderson of El Cerrito recently bought a Smart car from a Nevada dealership after seeing one on a trip to Europe. He said the parking, fuel economy and handling make it well worth the \$25,000 he paid.

"It's (made by Mercedes) so it drives a lot better than we expected," said the law-enforcement retiree. "Everywhere we go, people see it and they just love it."

Anticipating reactions like Anderson's, ZAP brought its first Smart cars into the United States in 2002 and spent \$10 million developing ways to modify them to meet U.S. safety and air pollution standards.

Like other micro-cars, the Smart car is so compact it can park head-on to a curb and not stick out into traffic. It boasts gas mileage that ranges from 40 to 75 mpg.

And to meet safety concerns, it's built with an internal roll cage similar to those found in NASCAR race cars, designed to protect passengers in case of a crash.

ZAP says it sells every Smart car it brings into the country, even at \$25,000 each. About 280 have gone to dealers in other states, and another 350 are awaiting safety and emissions modifications for the American market. ZAP said it is currently seeking authorization from California regulators to sell the cars in this state.

Within 90 days of exhibiting a U.S.-ready Smart car at a National Automobile Dealers Association show in early 2005, ZAP said it received more than \$2.2 billion in purchase orders from dealers around the country.

"You would have thought we were passing out \$100 bills at our booth," Schneider said of the attention the Smart car drew at the show.

But when ZAP officials met with DaimlerChrysler in March 2005 to explain their marketing strategy and the modifications they're doing for the U.S. market, things turned ugly, according to a suit ZAP filed against DaimlerChrysler last October.

According to the suit, filed in Los Angeles County Superior Court, ZAP announced it would place a purchase order with DaimlerChrysler to bring more than 76,000 Smart cars into the United States.

Shortly afterward, according to the suit, DaimlerChrysler officials said publicly they knew nothing about such an order and questioned ZAP's financing, as well as the safety of its modifications -- even though the cars had already passed muster with all federal and most state regulators.

Its credibility questioned, ZAP saw its stock plunge from \$5 a share in late 2004 to \$1 a share in May 2005, and as low as 25 cents by the end of last year. It has since rebounded to about 70 cents a share.

The suit hasn't yet gone to trial, and DaimlerChrysler spokeswoman Bettina Singhartinger declined to comment, citing the pending litigation.

Last month DaimlerChrysler announced its own plans to sell the Smart car in the United States at a price that could be \$10,000 below what ZAP charges.

Meanwhile ZAP continues to buy Smart cars through independent brokers in Europe and then modifies them to meet U.S. standards at a plant in Southern California.

Despite the high price, ZAP says demand is relentless.

Tom Day, an auto dealer in Scottsdale, Ariz., said he's sold more than 30 Smart cars since March, at about \$28,000 each.

"I have everyone from teenagers to (rock star) Alice Cooper buying them," he said. His customers like the car's look and its high gas mileage, which some buyers have told him tops 70 miles to the gallon. He compares the car to the Mini Cooper, a car with such a high "cool"-quotient that it sells briskly despite a price that can exceed \$30,000.

"People are really excited about the car. They tell me they've been waiting for this kind of car for years," Day said.

Even if its Smart car business is eclipsed by DaimlerChrysler's expected leap into the U.S. market, ZAP has alternatives waiting in the wings.

One is the Xebra, a Chinese-built three-wheel electric car, which costs less than \$10,000 and has a range of up to 40 miles between charges.

Larry Dye, who owns Electric Wheels Inc. in Salem, Oregon, said he's taken delivery of 11 Xebras and sold them all. "A lot of people are buying them as commuter vehicles to get to and from work," he said.

One Xebra owner is Dave Johnson of Fultano's Pizza in Cannon Beach, Ore. He said his new three-wheeled Xebra doesn't have enough range to be his primary delivery vehicle, but says its visibility helps promote his business. And he hopes his purchase will encourage the development of electric cars. "I think it's a good cause to get behind," the pizza purveyor said.

ZAP is also preparing to import the Brazilian-made Obvio, a flashy 175-hp rocket with Maserati-style doors that open like butterfly wings. Schneider said ZAP could bring Obvios into the market by 2007 and sell them for as little as \$14,000.

Asked about the Obvio's potential, Scottsdale auto dealer Day replied, "I think it will be one of the hottest-selling cars on the market."

But even as ZAP burrows into the micro-car market, it's facing competition from companies like Honda and Toyota, both of which have introduced small, fuel-efficient cars in recent months.

Because they seat four people and are several feet longer than micro-cars, the Honda Fit and Toyota Yaris are not quite in the same class as the Smart car or Obvio. David Thomas, an editor with Cars.com, said the good mileage and slightly bigger size of Honda's and Toyota's subcompacts could lure plenty of customers.

But Joel Baker, a futurist and author based in St. Paul, Minn., predicts both kinds of cars can co-exist and even help fertilize the small-car market.

ZAP AT A GLANCE

Business: Importing fuel-efficient micro-cars
Headquarters: Santa Rosa
Founded: 1994
Number of employees: 60
What its name stands for: Zero Air Pollution
Ownership: Publicly traded on the NYSE (ticker symbol ZP)
2005 revenue: \$3.6 million
2005 loss: \$23.5 million
Friday's closing stock price: 69 cents
Source: Bee research

[Fresno Bee editorial. Tuesday, July 25, 2006:](#)

Measure C vital

Fresno County supervisors are expected to put it on the ballot.

Fresno County's transportation picture is hardly perfect. Many roads and streets aren't up to the demands of traffic. Mass transit is inadequate. Alternatives to the automobile are few.

But things would be unimaginably worse had the voters of the county not chosen to tax themselves to pay for better transportation back in 1986, when they passed the original Measure C.

The half-cent sales tax authorized by Measure C will expire in June 2007. To ensure a seamless transition, voters will be asked to approve an extension of the tax in November. It's essential that we do so.

The next step toward that goal should come today, when the Fresno County Board of Supervisors votes, as it is expected to do, to put the extension on the Nov. 7 ballot.

An effort to extend the measure in 2002 failed, largely because the various interest groups couldn't achieve a workable consensus. The measure was publicly opposed by an odd collection of environmental and anti-tax groups.

This extension is markedly different from the original measure in several respects. The original Measure C allocated almost three-quarters of its revenue to major new highway and street projects. Such projects will get about 30 cents per dollar if the proposed extension is passed. A slightly larger share will be spent by cities and the county on local streets and roads.

The new Measure C would give a much-needed boost to mass transit. Almost one-quarter of the funds would be spent on buses, vanpools and other public transit uses, including some money for studies of light rail feasibility. Most of the increased transit money would be spent to add buses and increase their frequency on the most heavily traveled routes.

Other funds from the extension would be used to replace older, polluting school buses and for a local contribution to rail consolidation in the city of Fresno.

Unlike the last time, no public opposition has surfaced - yet. That's crucial, because the extension requires a two-thirds vote in order to pass. That's difficult even under the best of circumstances.

But the need is unquestionable. Fresno County's transportation system is far from perfect, but it could be much worse - and will be - if a growing population must cope with increased demands on that system without adequate revenues.

Like any compromise, the spending plan proposed under the Measure C extension won't please everyone. But it is a workable plan, and meets most of our most pressing needs. Once the county supervisors have officially placed it on the ballot, it will be time for everyone who cares about the future of Fresno County to gear up for the great effort required to pass it. Failing to do so would be catastrophic.

[Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Tuesday, July 25, 2006:](#)

New logo, tagline play to our area's strength

By SHERYL BARBICH, Bakersfield

There seems to be confusion about the logo change that is requested of the city and the Bakersfield "brand."

The request is to replace a "squiggle" logo with a graphic that depicts the name "Bakersfield" accented with a green leaf. This proposed logo is boldly written, forward moving and emphasizes a return to our roots by putting the "field" back in Bakersfield through the symbol of a green leaf dotting the "i."

The green leaf is a visual attempt to counter the image of Bakersfield as "hot and dusty," as identified through outside research.

The request is for the city to officially adopt this logo and develop a time line for implementation that would begin with changes, such as letterhead, and the "Welcome to Bakersfield" signs on Highway 99.

Complete implementation may take years, as vehicle and other signage is replaced. Private funding is available to underwrite some of the costs of revamping the welcome signs.

Adoption of the Bakersfield brand, or tagline "Life as it should be" is not before the city.

Developed as a result of extensive market research, this tagline is part of a marketing tool available for the community to use if it desires. But Vision 2020 has not proposed that the city formally adopt it now.

The tagline grew out of research suggesting that Bakersfield is a community where you can still have the "California dream." There is no question that there are [air quality](#), gang and other issues facing us that we are working to solve.

But research points to five distinct descriptors or "truths" about Bakersfield that we can leverage and that differentiate us from other communities:

- Open, generous spirit: There still is a small town atmosphere, where visitors and new residents are welcomed. Those in need are helped.
- Attainable quality lifestyle: It is easy to start and succeed in a small business. We can play outside year-round. Our schools are healthy and growing. We are a diverse community with no barriers to success based on ethnicity.
- Proximity/mobility: Mountains, oceans, lakes, river and redwoods are close by. So are major cities. The new air terminal provides easier access. There are fewer traffic hassles than other cities.
- Natural abundance and prosperity: Green improvements are evident around the community. Fresh produce is easily available, year-round. We are surrounded by abundant energy resources, such as oil, wind, solar and natural gas.
- Unique quirky sophistication: Many of our residents bring rich, worldly experiences to Bakersfield with them. Arts programs are healthy and growing. Our diverse population brings international cultures and restaurants.

Collectively these traits are summed up in the "Life as it should be" brand or tagline, which reflects the many strengths of our community.

I hope residents and letter writers who prefer to focus on negatives, are actively involved with their neighbors who are engaged in helping Bakersfield become "Life as it should be."

After all, this can-do attitude and desire to continually improve our community are also very much part of "Life as it should be."

Sheryl Barbich is president of Greater Bakersfield Vision 2020.

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, July 25, 2006:](#)

Slogan arrogant

"Life as it Should Be" is probably the most arrogant slogan I have ever heard. I live in the sprawl that is the northwest and find that the new signs going up are an insult on Bakersfield's integrity.

Bakersfield is my hometown and I love it unconditionally, for reasons outsiders do not understand.

If planners are under the impression that valley fever, pollution, violence and urban sprawl is the way life should be, then I'm not so sure this is the place I want to call home.

When I explain Bakersfield to people at my college, I say "it's a suburb of Los Angeles (of sorts), separated by mountains. It's hot, vast and (until I experienced life in the Bible belt) conservative. There is stuff to do if you put your mind to it, and our king is Buck Owens. It's probably like any other city you've seen, except we have Dewar's chews and it's a great launch pad for "travel."

I would never dream to have the audacity to describe my Bakersfield community as something as pompous as "Life as it Should Be."

We are a quickly growing, tract-home loving, dog walking, [air polluting](#)/SUV driving, local news watching, QVC ordering, Buck Owens-idolizing, Costco-shopping, brunching, jury duty-going swimming pool land.

We should embrace our simplicity and our long lines and say: "Bakersfield: The way it is."

-- CRYSTLE SANCHEZ, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, July 25, 2006:](#)

Laugh or cry?

A Vision 2020 committee believes a coordinated marketing strategy and a new city logo will help Bakersfield's image?

Spending \$261,000 plus for monuments is going to help?

Do I laugh or cry? Just read *The Californian*:

- Sunday, July 16, letter to the editor: "Shopping mayhem."
- Sunday, July 16, Local Section: "Night crimes worry downtown workers."
- Sunday, July 16, Local Section: "Rosedale Highway is driving these guys crazy."
- Saturday, July 15, Local Section: "Carson: Gang violence needs emergency plan."
- Sunday, July 16, Viewpoint: "[Clean up valley's air.](#)"

Have you ever called for a police officer and they never respond?

I could go on. Here is a novel idea: Why doesn't the City Council try being proactive for a change and see that the people who pay the taxes are being served?

You just might find this is the best way to change the city's image.

-- DONALD HASLETT, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, July 25, 2006:](#)

As it could be?

Apparently, *Californian* columnist Robert Price has no problem with "...either the squiggle or the leaf." I do. Notwithstanding the fact that the leaf fails to pass what I call the three "C" test (it is not cute, clever or creative), it does not symbolize anything at all that is unique to Bakersfield. What I would suggest is a red hot sun surrounded by a black cloud of [smog](#) with a silver lining around it. Why the silver lining:

- The Valley Plaza has become known, not as a place where people shop 'till they drop, but a place where people shoot 'till they drop.
- There is a meth head to our madness: While Bakersfield residents cook in the midsummer sun, "chemistry lab" operators throughout the city and the surrounding communities are cooking enough meth to supply a whole nation of crack heads.
- The Rockin' Rodeo had to close its doors because it turned into the Wild West.

- When city planners finally opted to introduce a water-enhanced park to cool down our temperature and our tempers in the summer, it became surrounded by West-Nile-Virus-infested mosquitoes and it soon contained the watery grave of a young girl who didn't see the signs.
- We just lost some of our greatest pioneers: Buck, Bonnie and Burke.

What was the question again? Oh yeah. And the answer?

Bakersfield: Life as it Should Be? If we're going to dream, why not follow the dreams of our biggest dreamers? Why not first face reality, and then dream of a Bakersfield as it could be?

-- BRUCE L. THIESSEN, Bakersfield

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, July 25, 2006:](#)

Ethanol now pays off as alternative to gasoline

It was great to see the commentary by Maria Elena Salinas (July 18) on Brazil and its ethanol-burning cars. We lived in Brazil in the 1980s and owned a 1984 VW Bug that ran on 100% ethanol.

Volkswagen, Ford, Fiat and General Motors all manufactured 100% ethanol-burning cars in Brazil. They simply lined the fuel system with a corrosion-resistant material. Ethanol is about 90% as efficient as gasoline. It competes economically when the price of petroleum is \$45 per barrel.

In the 1990s, Brazil returned to gasoline cars as the price of petroleum dropped below \$45. Today, with the price of petroleum above \$70, ethanol is a clear winner.

What are the advantages of ethanol? It would stabilize fuel prices, decrease vehicle-caused pollution, lower the U.S. trade imbalance by billions of dollars, give our farmers a tremendous opportunity to return to profitability and free us from being held hostage by oil-producing countries.

One would hope that California (and companies like Pacific Ethanol) would lead the way in introducing ethanol at the pump in our state. The car manufacturers will not be far behind.

Donald Faul, Fresno

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, July 23, 2006:](#)

No to Motorsports park

Editor: Nonsense reached new heights July 13 with the publication in the Sun-Star of a sports column devoted to extolling the virtues of "sacrifice" for the sake of Riverside Motorsports Park. Webster's tells us sacrifice "involves the surrender or destruction of something prized or desirable for the sake of something considered as having a higher or more pressing claim." Again, that's a "higher or more pressing claim."

Those schooled in the Bible are well-acquainted with the concept: Abraham would sacrifice Isaac. The payoff? Remaining in God's good graces through obedience. The ultimate sacrifice, of course, involved Christ's suffering on the cross. The payoff? The redemption of humankind. Indeed, sacrifice means giving up something great for something even better.

Our logically intrepid sports columnist is determined, it seems, to have us give up something great for something odious. He says, "I care as much as anyone about whether or not my kids will be able to breathe clean air." It's then the writer indicates clean air is something we can afford to sacrifice.

This reminds of a telling scene in the film "An Inconvenient Truth" (a film, by the way, that every patriot should see). On the left side of a scale sits gleaming bars of gold. On the right side sits the planet Earth. Let's see . . . what should we choose? As St. Augustine said, "There is more than one way of sacrificing to the fallen angels."

Confusion continues with the writer's claim that "we are a culture that is used to making sacrifices." His proof? "We make environmental sacrifices so we can eat fresh produce, so we can feel more comfortable in our homes and so we can look stylish driving to work." The pesticide and fossil fuel-induced environmental damage to which he apparently alludes were less conscious sacrifices than thoughtless tragic consequences, strong cases for not following such foolhardy paths into the future.

The house of cards logic continues as the writer says, "We've got a budding university. So why not a world-class draw like the Riverside Park?" I guess I don't see the connection. Why not mass suicide? Why not the world's largest Almond Roca? Heck, I'd just be happy with a Trader Joe's.

Non-sequiturs aside, a techno-industry built around the university's medical research or geared toward solving our Valley's horrific air pollution problem would be much more welcome than one that would pump untold more tons of pollutants into our "spare the air" skies.

The writer Ivan Goncharov said it best: "It is a trick among the dishonest to offer sacrifices that are not needed or not possible, to avoid making those that are required."

MARC MEDEFIND