

Book sounds alarm on SJ Valley sprawl

by Garth Stapley

Modesto Bee, Friday, Jan. 12, 2007

Whether the San Joaquin Valley continues to produce food and happy people or smog and endless rows of ugly houses is the theme of an upcoming book by Modesto's Great Valley Center.

"Our Valley, Our Choice," to be released soon by Heyday Books, sounds a warning bell intended to shake awake those not aware that the valley is on the brink of a radical transformation.

The population of about 3.3 million from Lodi to Bakersfield will more than double in 40 years, experts predict. If we continue sprawling at a typical pace, Stanislaus County and its neighbors can expect to become a soulless stretch of oil-stained concrete, the authors warn.

"We have a chance not just to avert environmental and cultural degradation," the book reads, "but to reach for greatness and build for ourselves and our children a world of which we can be proud."

Gov. Schwarzenegger grasped the valley's increasing profile two years ago when he created the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley. Its primary outgrowth is the ongoing San Joaquin Valley Blueprint process relying on town hall meetings within each county.

The Great Valley Center will meld the counties' visions into one later this year. Regional cooperation is a key focus.

But participants trying to drum up interest and input detect an unsettling apathy. "Our Valley, Our Choice" is the Great Valley Center's stab at drawing regular people into the process.

"The partnership recommendations are sort of complicated and technical," said Carol Whiteside, the center's founder and president. "The challenge becomes, 'How do we engage real people in this moment?'"

More pictures than policy

"Our Valley, Our Choice" is more pictures than policy and will be more at home on coffee tables than in libraries.

Heavy on photographs, colored charts and graphics, the 112-page book relies heavily on wonkish studies but reads more like a magazine than a research paper.

"We're totally on board with having people better understand the valley's problems and solutions," said Jaime Holt, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District spokeswoman.

Her agency may play a role in distributing the book, along with councils of governments, or transportation planning agencies, in each of the San Joaquin Valley's eight counties. They are Stanislaus, San Joaquin, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kern, Tulare and Kings counties.

Topics range from housing and farmland preservation to new jobs and the benefits of shady trees.

"Increased traffic congestion and air pollution, barren land and a catastrophic loss of agricultural capacity are not inevitable," reads one passage. "There is still an opportunity to preserve what is valuable to the land and to its people."

Who is the book's intended audience?

"People who live in the valley, especially young people who have a stake in the future," Whiteside said. "People who need to understand that participation matters. People who are cynical. It's a matter of bringing them back into the process."

The "instant book" required 12 weeks to put together, Whiteside said, but was "sort of easy because we're dealing with these issues and concepts all the time." Her nonprofit think tank throws its weight behind efforts to improve all aspects of the valley, which is the state's fastest-growing region.

The California Architectural Foundation and the American Institute of Architects provided much of the book's funding. It will sell for \$18 and should be released in a few weeks.

A concluding admonition reads, "Prompt action is critical. A communal voice needs to be heard. Don't allow others to speak for you and your children."

Spare the Air approved for another \$7.5 million

By Kiley Russell, MEDIANEWS STAFF
Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, Jan. 12, 2007

Even though a Bay Area program offering free transit during smoggy days may be an inefficient way to reduce pollution, regional transportation managers voted Wednesday to keep it alive.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission voted unanimously to spend \$7.5 million on the Spare the Air program. Last year the commission spent \$13.2 million to offer six days of free transit during the regions most polluted commute days.

The decision to continue the free-ride days on 26 of the regions transit systems was contingent on an evaluation of last years program, which was presented to commissioners this week.

The analysis shows a nearly \$411,000-per-ton cost to reduce vehicle emissions, which led one staff member to describe the programs cost effectiveness as fairly low.

Even with fewer commuters in their cars, the Bay Area avoided exceeding the national eight-hour ozone standard on just two of the six free transit days. However, the report said the air quality conditions could have been much worse without the Spare the Air program.

And the report suggests the program has other benefits.

Transit ridership increased by 15 percent, or by about 1.35 million riders, during the six days. That led to nearly 529,000 fewer car trips and 3.5 million fewer miles of automobile travel for every free transit day.

Also, the campaign successfully achieved its main goals of raising public awareness about the link between travel choice and air quality and encouraging the public to drive less and take transit more, the report said.

Not all Spare the Air days led to free transit, however, and transit ridership increased only marginally during those three weekdays.

Its extremely expensive, transit activist David Schonbrunn told the commissioners. Nobody, the air district included, has shown ... whether this actually improved air quality in places like Livermore.

Sue Lempert, who represents the cities of San Mateo County on the commission, expressed concerns about the cost of the program last year.

She said this summer is predicted to be unusually hot, which will lead to high levels of pollution. She suggested the commission modify the program to encourage future transit use by offering three free rides for every six days paid, for example.

Commissioners also expressed interest in finding corporate sponsorships for the program to help reduce its ultimate cost.

Also, program managers will work this year with BART and ferry operators to improve those systems customer satisfaction during Spare the Air days.

Last year, BART was inundated with unruly groups of youths who annoyed regular customers, and the ferries, which saw a more than 300 percent increase in ridership, were overcrowded and delayed.

The commission will work out the details of this years Spare the Air program over the next few months.

EBMUD, USGS tap ground for water

Bayside Groundwater Project to explore aquifer under San Lorenzo

By Rachel Cohen, STAFF WRITER

Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, Jan. 12, 2007

SAN LORENZO — A heavy bolted pump sits on the surface, but follow it 650 feet down and it taps into a giant aquifer that engineers are hoping will be able to serve the East Bay in times of drought.

The well dips into the ground from the western end of Grant Avenue — on the Oro Loma Sanitary District grounds — and is the fountainhead of a partnership between the East Bay Municipal Utility District and the U.S. Geological Survey. After years of public opposition and review, the Bayside Groundwater Project is under way, pumping out groundwater for drinking and injecting water back into the ground to keep levels stable.

The project pumps out 1 million gallons a day, enough to cover three football fields with 1 foot of water.

Once the water is pumped out, the plan is that it will be treated and joined with other water supplies. The main production well, built in 1998, has undergone a couple of testing cycles in which water was injected into the natural underground tank, stored and later checked for quality and level. The results were presented to the public in several environmental impact reviews.

An early design planned for 10 million gallons a day to be pumped out, which would require above-ground aeration that the Heron Bay Homeowners Association opposed because of air quality concerns. The association has about 730 homes just north of the project in San Leandro. Heron Bay's Chris Malloy said homeowners also were concerned about the ground potentially sinking as a result of water being removed, a phenomenon known as subsidence.

"Subsidence for a homeowner is something you couldn't get insurance for," he said. "If a hole opens up, that's too bad."

The volume was reduced to 1 million gallons per day to get results that would prevent subsidence from occurring.

The USGS, which contributes 20 percent of federal funds, came in to detect any change in ground level and has so far not recorded any.

San Leandro homeowners also were concerned about contamination from several local wells and leakage from a WWII-era explosives plant. For more than 100 years, people have been using 20- to 80-foot-deep wells.

Ken Minn, a civil engineer who has been with the project for three years, said most of these wells are plugged and that the far deeper aquifer is covered with 300 feet of protective clay.

He added that EBMUD will be detecting and monitoring all water quality throughout the project term. It must obtain permits from the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Board and the Department of Health Services before any water enters the general drinking supply.

Some two dozen community homeowners, wastewater agency representatives and council members will meet about every six months to receive project updates.

EBMUD found the aquifer after searching throughout the Bay Area for an alternate water source that could ease the common 25 percent reduction measures advised in a drought. Carbon dating determined that the aquifer is a source of pristine water about 9,000 years old. The basin stretches roughly midway under the Bay, east to the Hayward fault line, south to Highway 92 and north to Oakland.

The project, now half complete, was funded by a \$2 million grant from Proposition 13, passed about a year and a half ago. It will be about 90 percent finished by March and is expected to be in use by the end of summer 2008.

Unlike dams and rivers that can be damaged during an earthquake, underground stores are less likely to be affected.

"A big deal with water is storage. We have plenty of water but we can't dam up all the rivers," said Charles Hardy of EBMUD. "A natural storage basin is underground."

China auto market ranks second as economy booms

Erstwhile 'bicycle kingdom' passes Japan as vehicle purchases jump 37 percent, could overtake United States by 2015

By Joe McDonald, Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Friday, Jan. 12, 2007

BEIJING - China surged past Japan to become the world's No. 2 vehicle market after the United States last year as car purchases by newly affluent drivers jumped 37 percent, the Chinese auto industry association said Thursday.

The announcement highlighted China's lightning evolution from a "bicycle kingdom" into a major auto market where foreign producers are racing to open factories and target a growing urban middle class.

Struggling U.S. automakers General Motors and Ford have gotten a boost from double-digit sales growth in China and fledgling Chinese manufacturers are starting to export their own cars, trucks and SUVs.

"There's money here, and people spend that money on cars," said Michael Dunne, vice president for Asia-Pacific for auto research firm J.D. Power and Associates. "The Chinese government has made no secret of its intention to develop a car culture and a car industry. All of the forces are working together."

China's overall vehicle sales, including trucks and buses, rose 25.1 percent to 7.2 million units last year, China Association of Automobile Manufacturers said. Passenger car sales rose to 3.8 million, it said.

Japan's total vehicle sales last year came to 5.7 million units, a slight decline from 2005, said the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association.

U.S. car and truck sales totaled 16.5 million units last year, down a bit from 2005, according to research firm Autodata Inc.

The Chinese car boom is driven by economic growth that is estimated to have reached 10.5 percent last year.

The officially endorsed car culture has changed the Chinese landscape almost overnight, with ancient city centers bulldozed to make way for broad avenues and the government spending heavily to build a nationwide highway network. Big cities are ringed by car dealerships. Fast food restaurants are opening drive-through windows.

The car craze has taken a toll in smog and congestion. China has most of the world's 10 dirtiest cities, and air quality is worsening as car exhaust increases. Rush-hour traffic slows to a crawl in Beijing, Shanghai and other urban centers.

China could overtake the United States as the top car market some time after 2015, Dunne said.

"It could happen," he said. "China's annual income per person is just over \$1,000, and they're buying 7 million vehicles. Imagine what happens when that goes to \$2,000 or \$3,000."

Red-hot Chinese sales have brought relief to U.S. automakers, which have seen weak demand at home.

General Motors Corp. said Monday that its total sales in China last year rose 32 percent over 2005 to 876,747 vehicles. Ford Motor Co. said sales of its brands, including Ford, Lincoln, Jaguar, Land Rover and Volvo, rose 87 percent to 166,722 units.

European and Japanese automakers report similar surges. Luxury auto maker Rolls Royce, owned by Germany's BMW AG, says its 2006 sales were up 60 percent. The company is expanding its work force to meet Chinese demand for its \$380,000 luxury Phantom.

China's biggest-selling automaker last year was Shanghai General Motors Corp., a GM joint venture, with 365,400 vehicles sold, according to the Chinese industry group.

The top-selling car was the Jetta, made by FAW-Volkswagen Co., one of Volkswagen AG's joint ventures.

The biggest Chinese manufacturer was Chery Automobile Co., with 272,400 units sold. Chery and DaimlerChrysler AG announced a plan last month for the Chinese company to make small cars for sale worldwide under the Dodge, Chrysler or Jeep brands.

China's automakers exported about 325,000 vehicles last year, about 80 percent of them low-priced trucks and buses bound for developing markets in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the government says.

They also are eager to break into the U.S. market, though analysts say they will have trouble meeting safety and environmental standards.

This week at the Detroit Auto Show, China's Changfeng Motor Co. displayed a pair of sport utility vehicles and two pickup trucks ahead of what it said were planned exports to the United States.

Legislation aims to boost biodiesel fuels

Alternative fuel helps reduce greenhouse gases

By Jake Henshaw, Sacramento Bureau

Visalia Times-Delta, Friday, Jan. 12, 2007

SACRAMENTO - Many California cars, buses and trucks likely will be running on biodiesel fuel if legislation introduced this week by Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, is adopted.

The seven-bill package would provide financing and tax breaks to stimulate production and use of the low-polluting fuel as well as require schools and other public agencies to operate their diesel-powered vehicles with it.

Florez said biodiesel fuel warrants this priority treatment because it is the most readily available fuel for widespread use that can improve air quality.

"We think this ultimately is the best way to go," Florez said. "This is the fuel we can use now."

He presented the bill at a press conference with supporters from farm, environmental, trucking and public interest groups.

Biodiesel may be made from a domestic renewable resources such as vegetable oils and rendered fats. It can be used in existing diesel engines without modification, he said.

There is only limited production and use of biodiesel now in California, Florez said, compared to at least other states with various programs to encourage its use.

Florez wants the state to set a standard for diesel fuel that mixes 20 percent biodiesel with petroleum-based fuel, so-called B20.

He said biodiesel reduces greenhouse gases 78 percent compared with petroleum-based fuel and that new studies are answering questions about whether biodiesel really reduces nitrogen oxides, a major component of smog.

Florez didn't provide cost figures for his legislation.

His package:

- ? Senate Bill 70: Sets standard for biodiesel fuels and blends.
- ? SB 71: requires all diesel vehicles operated by state and local governments and mass transit agencies to use a minimum blend of 20 percent diesel.
- ? SB 72: Mandates the use of biodiesel in all diesel-powered school buses, public and private.
- ? SB 73: Creates a biodiesel production tax credit of \$0.30 per gallon for 100 percent biodiesel up to the first 30 million gallons produced annually.
- ? SB 74: Exempts the biodiesel portion of any blended fuel from state the sales tax and establishes a tax credit for biodiesel fueling stations and equipment.
- ? SB 75: Prohibits the state from buying a diesel-powered vehicle unless it has a manufacturer's warranty certifying it to operate on at least B20 fuel.
- ? SB 76: Creates the California Biodiesel Investment Account to provide grants to farmers to grow "energy crops" and to cities and counties to encourage them to develop facilities like fuel stations for biodiesel.

This account also would fund research such which crops are best for biodiesel production.

Councilwoman Suzanne Tucker refuses to release Site 300 e-mails

John Upton

Tracy Press, Friday, Jan. 12, 2007

Mayor Pro Tem Suzanne Tucker has refused to publicly release e-mails sent between herself and weapons researchers working for the federal government a mile from Tracy.

Tucker argued that the e-mails are exempt from state laws designed to open government to public scrutiny because she used a personal computer and personal e-mail address instead of city equipment when she received an e-mail from the lab about nuclear weapons research proposed for Site 300. It's unclear if Tucker responded to the e-mail, or if she and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory workers e-mailed each other to discuss a proposed bio-agent laboratory that has also proved controversial. The Press asked to see those e-mails as well, if they exist, and she argued that those, too, would be exempt from public records laws.

In September, Tucker and other council members voted to ask Tracy Tomorrow and Beyond, an advisory group to the council, to gather public input on the contentious bio-lab issue and make a recommendation to the council.

Council members work on city-provided laptops and use their own e-mails, as they aren't given city e-mail accounts, according to Zane Johnston, the city's finance director and technology boss.

Tucker said she never uses the city's laptop.

"My computer is my private computer, purchased and maintained by my husband and not paid for by any city money, and, therefore, my private e-mail is exempt" from public records laws, she wrote in an e-mail Thursday.

California Newspapers Publishers Association attorney Jim Ewert said he believes Tucker is breaking the law by refusing to hand over her e-mails.

"(She) is communicating with another government agency on an e-mail account," Ewert said. "She is acting as an agent for the city in the course and scope of her duties as a councilperson, and as such, she is required to disclose that information."

But Tucker, who is paid nearly \$600 a month by the city, disagrees.

"I am not an agent of the local government," Tucker wrote in an e-mail. "I am an agent of the local people."

The California Public Records Act requires "writing containing information relating to the conduct of the public's business prepared, owned, used or retained by any state or local agency" be made public no more than 10 days after it is requested.

The California Constitution also includes a section that reads, "the writings of public officials ... shall be open to public scrutiny."

The Tracy Press first requested e-mails between Tucker and Lawrence Livermore on Dec. 21.

Tucker is Tracy's only elected representative to have voiced support for a bid to build a Department of Homeland Security laboratory to study fatal diseases with no known cure at the Department of Energy's 7,000-acre Site 300 southwest of Tracy.

Tucker is also the council's only representative on Tracy Tomorrow, which will recommend next week whether the city should support Lawrence Livermore's bid to build the anti-biological terrorism facility.

According to Tucker, Lawrence Livermore's public affairs team sent her an e-mail a day after activist Bob Sarvey told the council Dec. 19 that he was worried about the lab's secretive plans to increase Site 300 outdoor test explosions — tests that might contain tritium and depleted uranium — by as much as eight times annually.

Tucker cut short debate Jan. 2 while presiding over a City Council discussion regarding the planned blasts. Mayor Brent Ives stepped down from the discussion because he works for Lawrence Livermore.

As acting mayor, Tucker ignored activist Sarvey's plea that the council rule the planned explosions a public nuisance.

"We have no action on this item, and I think this was an exercise in gathering data for our own information," Tucker said as she ended an emotional, 45-minute debate a little before midnight.

The discussion was called by Councilwoman Irene Sundberg, but Tucker did not ask Sundberg whether she was ready to end the debate or whether she wanted the council to take any action or vote.

Sundberg said Thursday she plans to have a vote on Lawrence Livermore's planned bio-lab and explosive tests at the next council meeting, scheduled for Tuesday. The city has no jurisdiction over Site 300, which has tested explosives since the 1960s.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Friday, Jan. 12, 2007:](#)

Derailing the future

Governor's dismissive attitude toward high-speed rail alarming.

In a budget proposal that's generally good for the Valley, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger hit one very sour note: His dismissive attitude toward the proposed high-speed rail project seems to be getting even worse. That's distressingly shortsighted.

In a briefing to reporters before the governor's State of the State speech Tuesday, aides said Schwarzenegger's latest round of proposed bonds to raise revenue for infrastructure will essentially push the state's borrowing capacity to its limit for the next decade.

So what does that mean for the \$9.9 billion high-speed rail bond already on the 2008 ballot? The officials said it should be derailed — again — and maybe spiked indefinitely.

That's deeply disappointing from a governor who spends a lot of time talking about regaining California's preeminence in high-technology and the state's reputation for forward thinking.

The high-speed rail project is an investment that will pay enormous dividends for the state and its residents. It will boost the economy and help clean up the air we breathe. Those are especially attractive virtues in the Valley, where we lag behind the rest of the state in the creation of high-paying jobs, and where we breathe some of the dirtiest air in the nation.

Let's review the bidding one more time:

The high-speed rail project, connecting Southern California with Sacramento and the Bay Area through the heart of the Valley, would create a generation's worth of high-paying engineering and construction jobs. It would spin off ancillary industries to supply and maintain the system, creating even more jobs.

Thousands of cars would be removed from the state's highways. That would reduce the amount of greenhouse gases we spew into the atmosphere — a pet project of the governor's — and cut smog-creating vehicle emissions that take an enormous toll in health costs, crop losses and other economic damage. It would cut our consumption of imported oil.

Taking the train means you don't have to drive. Imagine a swift and comfortable ride to Los Angeles to take the kids to Disneyland. Further imagine speeding past freeways choked with rush-hour traffic. How about taking the train to the Bay Area and not having to pay a small fortune to park the car once you get there?

The United States pioneered passenger travel by rail. But we now rank dead last among the world's developed nations in our use of this American invention.

The governor goes on at great length about the future and California's place in it. So where did he get this vast blind spot on the issue of high-speed rail?

[Letter to the Visalia Times-Delta, Friday, Jan. 12, 2007:](#)

Air quality regulations must be enforced

Your editorial of Jan.2 reveals a strikingly cavalier attitude toward law enforcement and public health. The Clean Air Act requires that the Valley air district uphold both the letter and spirit of the law regarding the attainment of public health standards for healthy air, in this case for PM 10. The accurate interpretation and reporting of data from pollution monitors goes to the heart of its mission under the law.

David Lightall, Fresno