

High-speed rail planners roll through Merced with details of project

By Danielle Gaines

Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, March 19, 2009

Whistle wailing, a Union Pacific train sped past the Merced Senior Center on Wednesday afternoon.

Inside the building, dozens of community members walked along neat rows of colorful posters portraying a whole new breed of train: the high-speed wonder that will whiz through town 10 years from now.

Representatives from the California High-Speed Rail Authority were in Merced to unveil proposed routes through town and answer residents' questions.

Gary Kennerley, a project manager for the authority, said nothing is definite. He indicated, though, that the rail authority was leaning toward building the high-speed rail line along the BNSF existing railway south of 23rd Street.

He also said the authority considered Castle Air Force Base its first choice for a major maintenance hub.

Still, "There is nothing in stone," he said. "(Castle) will be looked at, as will the other locations."

Other maintenance sites are being considered near Chowchilla and Madera.

"We have the lines already going into Castle," Atwater Councilman Joe Rivero said. "It is centrally located. It would be a good choice for us and a good choice for the system."

The first priority for the rail authority is to create a line that starts in San Francisco, heads south through the Central Valley after a brief jog north to Merced and ends in Los Angeles. Travel time for the entire route is 2 hours, 45 minutes. Later sections would be added to connect Sacramento in the north to San Diego in the south.

In the Valley, the train would stop in Merced, Fresno and Bakersfield. A stop between Fresno and Bakersfield would be included in Visalia, Tulare or Hanford.

In general, the high-speed route would follow existing transportation corridors to decrease environmental damage.

Community members at the session were interested in seeing the project get under way. On one comment board, the suggestion scrawled in red marker was simple: "Start digging now." Another person added: "Go for it -- and hire local consultants."

Jim Sutherland, a 63-year-old retired Merced resident said he was "100 percent behind the project."

He even said he would consider working part-time if the Castle maintenance hub goes from blueprint to bricks and mortar.

As a longtime observer of rail transportation, Sutherland said high-speed service was long overdue.

"There are a lot of things I would like to do on the rail," he said. "I could go to Southern California and sightsee. Now that I can."

Sutherland wasn't alone. Even people from 4,000 miles away were on board with the plan.

Tom Watson, 38, attended the meeting with his extended family. Watson, his wife and two daughters live in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His wife is from Merced, and they decided to attend the meeting while visiting her parents.

"I think it is a great idea, a very interesting idea," Watson said.

He said his family would most likely use the rail when traveling from the San Francisco airport to Merced on family vacations.

Larry Salinas, an assistant vice chancellor at UC Merced, said the rail service would help the university attract more students and also provide students an easy way to connect with their family and friends on weekends.

Kennerley said all the excitement at the meeting was a good sign for what is the very start of the final planning process.

The meeting Wednesday was to solicit suggestions from the community about preferred routes and potential environmental concerns.

The authority will host several similar meetings throughout California before identifying alternative plans.

Those plans will undergo a public review process before an environmental impact report is prepared.

Kennerley said planners were hoping for all the environmental documents to be certified by 2012.

If ground breaks in 2011, train service is expected to begin as early as 2018.

Californians approved a \$40 billion state bond to fund the project in November 2008.

County supervisor Jerry O'Banion said he supported the project, but hoped a stop in Los Banos might be added before the plans become final.

O'Banion noted that much of the information at the meeting was still speculation.

"It is the future. It is not going to happen overnight," he said. "But if you don't start planning sometime, it will never occur."

If the project is completed, transportation in the Central Valley would be transformed.

"It will be more like flying on the ground rather than taking the train," Kennerley said.

Now that's high speed.

Richmond officials ponder a Fourth of July celebration without fireworks

By Katherine Tam, West County Times

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Thursday, March 19, 2009

Fireworks or laser lights?

Richmond city leaders are trying to determine if they need to nix the annual July 3 fireworks show and switch to a laser light show, to avoid disturbing endangered brown pelicans roosting on nearby Brooks Island and the angst of a last-minute event cancellation.

"It's possible we may not be able to get permits to have the program," said Keith Jabari, recreation director.

Fireworks for Richmond's popular July 3 event typically are staged from a barge 1,000 feet offshore. Last year, federal wildlife experts worried the explosions would disturb more than 200 brown pelicans roosting on Brooks Island, and asked the city to move its barge south, closer to Point Isabel.

Operators had trouble positioning the barge where federal experts wanted because water in certain channels is shallow. So much uncertainty surrounded last year's event that Jabari said the city did not get final clearance to launch the fireworks until 15 minutes before the show started.

Hoping to avoid a repeat, city staff members broached the idea of switching to a laser light show at Civic Center. But some residents and council members are recoiling at the thought of celebrating Independence Day without fireworks, which they say is as traditional as "apple pie and America."

"The fireworks, you don't have to go to the marina to see it. You can see it from your balcony, your deck, from your own home throughout the city of Richmond. I always look forward to that,"

Councilman Nat Bates said at Tuesday night's council meeting. "For 30 minutes a year, birds are a little bit disturbed."

But Councilman Jeff Ritterman doesn't see a fireworks alternative as something to balk at, especially since many other cities still offer a fireworks display.

"Fireworks are as American as apple pie — so are SUVs, so are Hummers, so is obesity, so is diabetes; they're not all the things we want," Ritterman said. "Fireworks are gunpowder. They're pollution any way you look at it. Why don't we say we're stepping into the new time? We're understanding this no longer makes sense with the world we live in."

A council majority still hopes to hold a fireworks show, and will ask a representative from the U.S. Coast Guard and state Fish and Game to attend its meeting Tuesday to brainstorm options.

The brown pelican was placed on the federal endangered species list in the 1970s. The pesticide DDT led to reproductive failures and further population declines, according to Fish and Game, and the substance was banned nationwide in 1972.

The birds lay eggs in January in Southern California and migrate north in mid- to late spring, said Doug Bell, wildlife program manager for the East Bay Regional Park District, which manages Brooks Island. They flock to the Bay, where they rest and overnight on secluded jetties and islands. Brooks Island also is a major nesting site for caspian terns and water birds.

"You have a perfect storm of thousands of birds using a very narrow spit of land all at once," he said.

Fireworks can startle the birds and cause them to fly into the air, crashing into rocks or one another and hurting themselves, he added. Some might be scared off jetties altogether.

State of RT discussed at morning gathering

By Niesha Lofing

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, March 19, 2009

Sacramento Regional Transit and the Sacramento Chamber of Commerce are hosting an event this morning showcasing plans for the future of transportation in the Sacramento region and honoring local projects and transit advocates.

Sacramento Regional Transit general manager Mike Wiley was to introduce TransitAction at the State of RT Breakfast at 7:30 a.m. at the Sheraton Grand Sacramento.

TransitAction is "the vision that will shape the future of transportation in the Sacramento region" for the next 25 to 30 years, an RT news release states. Wiley also will present the Transit Master Plan, which outlines how transit projects and programs will be developed, financed and operated through 2035.

The first ever TransitAction Awards also will be presented this morning.

Award recipients include the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, the Globe Mills development, Friends of Light Rail and Transit president Dain Domich and Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento.

The air district is receiving the Agency of the Year award for offering a transit-friendly environment for its employees and enhancing public transit benefits, the release states.

Globe Mills is receiving the Transit Oriented Development of the Year award for being a successful mixed-use project downtown that offers lofts and affordable housing for seniors and neighborhood-oriented commercial opportunities in close proximity to a light rail station.

Domich is receiving the Transit Advocate of the Year award for being a supporter of transit in communities and spearheading the Catholic Healthcare West development at the 29th Street light rail station, the release states.

Matsui is receiving the Elected Official of the Year award for helping secure federal funding for area transit projects and being a "longtime champion of RT and working tirelessly for public transit in the Sacramento region," the release states.

Bill would allow local-option fees for roads

By Kelley Shannon, Associated Press Writer

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Thursday, March 19, 2009

AUSTIN, Texas—A Dallas senator proposed Wednesday allowing local-option elections for some urban counties to impose taxes and fees for road, bridge and rail projects.

Sen. John Carona, a Republican who chairs the Senate transportation committee, said local communities need more ways to fund road projects because of increasing transportation demands and a shortage of state and federal money.

His proposal would allow county gasoline taxes and assorted fees on parking, drivers' licenses and vehicle registrations. It also would allow for a "Texas new resident roadway impact fee" of up to \$250 on vehicles that were previously registered out of state. All the money-raising proposals and the transportation projects would have to be approved by local voters.

"It is voluntary, and it does allow voter involvement," Carona said to a packed committee meeting at the state Capitol.

A number of local officials from the Dallas-Fort Worth region testified in support of the legislation. They said their areas have traffic congestion and air quality problems.

"Things are only going to get worse if we don't act," said Denton County Judge Mary Horn.

Under Carona's proposal, communities could pay for transportation projects using the fees with or without issuing bonds.

Not everyone approves of the plan.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation submitted written testimony saying that state and local governments are spending at a rate that exceeds their actual growth and suggested that governments set different spending priorities so they can pay for transportation from traditional revenue sources. The group also noted that some state fuel tax money is diverted to other uses and not used for transportation projects.

Gov. Rick Perry and some lawmakers have said they want to stop that diversion of fuel tax money. Perry has said it amounts to about \$1.2 billion in each state budget cycle.

Carona said his legislation as written covers the Dallas-Fort Worth area and Bexar and Travis counties. He said he has received word that El Paso and Harris counties want to join the legislation.

A part of the plan that would allow fuel taxes and vehicle registration fees to be used for rail projects would require Texas voters to first pass a state constitutional amendment.

Carona said his proposal will change as lawmakers and members of the public give their input during the legislative session.

He urged those who support the bill to let Perry know their views.

Perry's spokeswoman, Allison Castle, said that the governor wants to work with Carona on transportation issues in the Dallas-Fort Worth area but said he has "concerns" about the legislation. She did not elaborate.

Utah renews opposition to federal pollution rule

By Mike Stark, Associated Press Writer

USA TODAY, Thursday, March 19, 2009

SALT LAKE CITY — Utah officials -- including members of the congressional delegation -- are renewing their opposition to a federal proposal that would lump Box Elder and Tooele counties in with some of the state's most polluted areas.

Republican Sens. Orrin Hatch and Bob Bennett and Rep. Rob Bishop met with top officials at the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday in hopes of keeping the two counties out of an area deemed in violation of new stricter standards for tiny bits of harmful pollution.

City and county officials worry that being tagged as out-of-compliance with federal pollution standards will mean a reduction in federal highway dollars and add an unnecessary burden to local businesses.

The EPA last year proposed designating three areas in Utah as "non-attainment," those not meeting exposure limits for certain particulate matter.

State environmental officials had expected metropolitan areas along the Wasatch Front to exceed the new limits but they were surprised when Box Elder and Tooele counties were also included.

The proposal is one of many approved late during the Bush administration now under review by the Obama administration and the EPA's new administrator, Lisa Jackson.

The dispute is over what's called "fine particulate matter," flecks of pollution smaller than the width of a human hair that come from car exhaust, power plants, burning wood and industrial activities.

The EPA says the particles can aggravate heart and lung problems and are a significant barrier to cleaning up air in cities across the country.

Utah is one of 25 states that EPA said has places where there's too much particulate matter known as PM2.5. The federal agency tightened the exposure limits for that pollution in 2006.

In December, the EPA said there were three "non-attainment" areas: one that includes Salt Lake, Weber, Davis, Tooele and Box Elder counties; another with Cache County, Utah, and Franklin County, Idaho; and another encompassing Utah County.

Catherine Roberts, particulate matter program coordinator for EPA in Denver, said Box Elder and Tooele counties were included because the agency's analysis showed they were among sources contributing to the problem.

The Utah Division of Air Quality has disputed the EPA's findings.

Bryce Bird, branch manager for the air quality division, said those two counties are typically the recipients of pollution from other more populated counties, such as Salt Lake, and not major sources.

He said leaving Box Elder and Tooele counties out of the designation will allow state officials to better focus their efforts on pollution in the metropolitan areas.

Brian Carver, a regional planner with the Bear River Association of Governments, which represents 39 local governments in the area, said concerns are mounting about the economic effects of the EPA's designation.

Businesses worry they'll face tighter standards for their air permits, which could put a pinch on their operations and may not put a dent in the overall problem along the Wasatch Front, he said.

"As long as Salt Lake County is in noncompliance, it doesn't matter what Box Elder County does," Carver said. "They're just going to be punished along with everyone else."

State lawmakers last session also took up the issue, approving a resolution that said the expanded boundary "may create a misperception that Utah has a bigger and more widespread air quality problem than is actually true."

The EPA's rule won't become final until after it appears in the Federal Register. After that, Utah will have three years to submit a plan for reducing pollution in the designated areas.

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Thursday, March 19, 2009:](#)

Investment trumps environmental regulation

By Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger

A little more than four years after we started a debate about the future of environmentalism, President Obama has largely ended it. In his State of the Union address, Obama called for the most far-reaching program ever proposed by an American president to remake America's energy economy - with hardly a mention of the environment.

In our 2004 essay, "The Death of Environmentalism," we argued that global warming was an unprecedented ecological challenge that would lead to the death of environmentalism. What we meant was that the environmental movement, as America had known it for the better part of four decades, would be forced to reconsider the central role that environmental protection and nature preservation played in its politics and policy proposals.

Reaction from many environmentalists was swift and harsh. Yet, today, environmental organizations have largely relegated images of polar bears and melting ice flows to the back pages of their magazines. Green jobs and clean energy investment are the eco-ideas of the moment.

This new post-environmental politics is only beginning to reveal itself and, like any revolution, will continue to advance in fits and starts. Along with the rhetorical shift that has already occurred, there is an important policy shift that is just beginning to take shape. Just a year or two ago, most advocates for climate change action viewed carbon caps and carbon trading as the central front in the effort to reduce emissions. And while green groups and President Obama are still overly reliant on these strategies, there is a growing acknowledgement that carbon regulations and carbon pricing alone will not be sufficient to achieve the goal of deep reductions in global carbon emissions.

This consensus has emerged as evidence has mounted that similar policies have failed to either reduce carbon emissions or create a thriving clean energy economy in the European Union.

Today a growing number of energy scientists, economists and even environmentalists have recognized that only enormous public investments in research, development and deployment of clean energy technologies (several times larger than the \$15 billion in annual investments that President Obama has proposed) will bring us the cheap and scalable clean energy technologies that we need.

Such an approach will not be cheap. The best estimates of how much the United States needs to spend annually on research, development and deployment of clean energy technologies in order to drive down their costs so they are a cost-effective alternative to fossil-fuel based energy is somewhere between \$50 billion and \$80 billion.

It was never realistic to have expected pollution regulations and carbon taxes to drive a global energy modernization project of the scale necessary to transform the global energy economy. We did not invent the personal computer by placing a "market-based cap" on typewriters nor create the Internet by taxing telegraphs and fax machines. To the contrary, government investment was largely responsible for bringing these revolutionary technologies, and a raft of others, into our lives. This included not only funding research and development at universities and national laboratories but also directly procuring and deploying cutting-edge technologies that were not yet ready for broad commercialization.

In the coming years, as recognition of the failure of carbon regulation and pricing to make much progress toward reducing global carbon emissions becomes ever more apparent, advocates for climate action, including environmentalists, will increasingly embrace a technology-and-investment centered framework. For as surely as the politics of climate and energy has forced environmentalists to abandon their nature-based rhetoric, the economic and technological

challenges inherent to the climate crisis will ultimately force them to abandon their pollution-focused remedies.

Let us hope that President Obama is quick to recognize this reality and moves quickly to make a commitment to invest in our clean energy future commensurate with the scale of the transformation we must make.

Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger are authors of "Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility," and founders of the Breakthrough Institute, a think tank.

[Letter to Lodi News Sentinel, Thursday, March 19, 2009:](#)

Air pollution inspectors should plant apple trees

"In late November, an inspector with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District cruised through a neighborhood of stately homes north of Turner Road."

How did he cruise? Did he drive a vehicle with an internal combustion engine, spewing the pollutants he was seeking? No? Did he ride a bicycle, leaving rubber tire residue on the pavement? Trouble here. Tires represent a serious pollutant. Just ask the EPA. In-line skates? Nope! Not on our sidewalks. Horse? Big problem with this idea. Horse exhaust attracts flies and other vermin that spread disease. The horse exhaust would then produce a problem for the San Joaquin Water Conservation District as soon as it rains and the residue leaches into the ground water.

The Air Pollution Control District is faced with the onerous task of attempting to control the tons of smoke and vehicle exhaust that enter our atmosphere, not to mention the bovine flatulence that has become a serious problem in the Valley.

A modest proposed solution is to place a tin pot on each inspector's head and a sack of apple seeds over the shoulder. Let them walk the highways and byways of the San Joaquin Valley, planting apple trees as they go. The blossoms are beautiful and fragrant in the spring. The fruit can feed weary travelers. The branches and leaves will provide cool shade from the hot summer sun and produce much needed oxygen.

This system worked for Johnny Appleseed in the Ohio Valley in the early 1800s. He is still famous and was well liked by all. We surely can't say that about the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District today. Maybe tomorrow.

Anthony Tsappis, Lodi

[Letter to the Merced Sun-Star, Thursday, March 19, 2009:](#)

Letter: Why not here?

Editor: I cannot believe the naivete of the people opposing the Wal-Mart distribution center.

Wal-Mart is going to place that center somewhere along the Highway 99 corridor to service its stores in this region.

No matter where it is built, we will still breathe the air pollution of the traffic through this Valley.

So if you cannot stop the project in all of the Valley, why not get the employment and tax benefit in our community? Our children need jobs with the potential for family-supporting careers and advancement.

Now is the time to act before a neighboring county or town aces us out.

Mel Ladousier, Merced

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses testimony provided by a Stanford scientist to the EPA that California has the right to set its own regulations against pollution in place based on two reasons: 1\) studies show that air pollution caused by vehicles affects the state of California more](#)

than other states and 2) it can be demonstrated that the danger and health risks in California are caused by this type of pollution. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at (559) 230-5851.

California, con mayor derecho a imponer su propia ley contra la contaminación

Manuel Ocaño, Noticiero Latino
Radio Bilingüe, Wednesday, March 18, 2009

Un científico de la Universidad de Stanford testificó que California tiene derecho a poner en vigor sus propias leyes ambientales, durante una audiencia de la Agencia federal de Protección Ambiental (EPA). La audiencia se lleva a cabo por orden del presidente, Barack Obama para revisar por qué EPA negó a California el año pasado un permiso relativo al tema.

Mark Jacobson, un ingeniero ambiental de Stanford dijo que California tiene derecho a activar su ley por dos razones básicas: Puede demostrar que el daño que causan la contaminación vehicular es peor para California que para otros estados, o puede demostrar simplemente el daño generalizado que causa la contaminación.

La importancia de que EPA otorgue el referido permiso a California es que se ampliaría a otros 13 estados, que en conjunto representan la mitad de la población estadounidense. La ley de California impone mayor rendimiento en el uso de combustible para los vehículos y menos contaminación a la industria automotriz.