

Air rule aims to alter commute practices Valley plan raises red flags among businesses.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

Sat., Aug. 1, 2009

Also in the Merced Sun-Star, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009

Local air officials are crafting a rule to coax more employees of large companies out of their cars and into buses, carpools and other commuting alternatives -- or their bosses will face penalties.

The size of the penalty hasn't yet been decided, said one official with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. But the possible cost of complying with the rule already is raising red flags among businesses.

"You'll need an on-site coordinator, and you'll have to deal with reporting requirements," said Rob Neenan of the California League of Food Processors, representing 60 processing companies in the Valley.

"Depending on the company, it could cost tens of thousands of dollars."

The rule will be discussed at September workshops and is expected to come before the district's governing board in December for possible approval.

The rule, aimed at employers with more than 100 eligible workers, is intended to trim ozone-making emissions and tiny particle pollution, called PM-2.5. The Valley has some of the nation's worst ozone and PM-2.5 pollution.

To be an eligible worker, an employee would have to commute to work between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m. Those who work different hours would not be counted.

To comply with the rule, businesses would earn points for implementing measures among four dozen pollution-saving options. For businesses with 100 to 249 eligible employees, 44 points are required. Larger businesses need 66 points.

Officials said businesses that did not earn enough points would be assessed a fee, which has not yet been determined.

One example of a pollution-cutting measure: Fifteen points would be earned by providing a compressed work schedule, eliminating at least one day of commuting every two weeks. Companies might opt for eight nine-hour days and one eight-hour day over the two-week period.

Other measures include working from home -- called telecommuting -- for a full workday, which earns nine points, and a carpool program matching potential riders in the same zip code, for which the district awards seven points.

Officials said they will estimate pollution reductions by requiring businesses to submit surveys noting how many employees are participating and which pollution-saving measures are involved. The surveys are informational and not tied to the points system.

"The rule does not force employees to use carpooling or alternative transportation," said Jessica Fierro, a district senior air quality specialist.

Air activists wonder how effective the rule will be if there is no threshold for participation.

"I think there needs to be a baseline or percentage of workers who must participate," said Laura Fultz Stout of the Coalition for Clean Air in Fresno. "Otherwise, I don't think you can verify the reductions."

Neenan said the rule is not a good fit for companies in his organization. "We have no problem with the concept of ridesharing," Neenan said. "But it's not likely that you'll get cannery workers to telecommute or ride a bike out to a cannery plant."

Battle lines drawn around Eaton Plaza trees **Tree Fresno is seeing red over camphor grove removal.**

By George Hostetter / The Fresno Bee
Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009

The city of Fresno will soon rev up the chain saws and clear-cut a part of its urban forest, all in the name of transforming Eaton Plaza into an idyllic green space amid downtown's asphalt and concrete.

That means war, say activists at Tree Fresno.

The City Council recently approved several changes to the plaza's master plan, including removal of what a staff report calls the "camphor grove" in the northwest corner of the four-acre site.

There are nine camphor and seven bottlebrush trees at the corner, not far from the historic Fresno Water Tower.

City officials say some of the trees, neglected for decades, are diseased. Roots buckle nearby sidewalks and the canopies block sunlight year-round, leaving the earth barren, officials say.

None of that illness and devastation fits into the master plan, and the trees must go if Eaton Plaza is to thrive, officials say.

It's too bad the trees can't be saved, says Kelly Riddle, the city's economic development coordinator and author of the staff report recommending their removal. "But they are what they are. We are adding a lot more trees than are out there now."

Initially the city plans to tear out parking lots and plant grass. More than 200 trees are to be added to Eaton Plaza by the time it's fully built out. That could be as soon as the end of 2012, although no date is set for work to begin.

But Jane Fortune, executive director of the urban environmental group Tree Fresno, says she doesn't buy the idea that the only way to save green space is to first destroy it.

"We are very much opposed to [the grove's] removal," she says.

Value of older trees

Tree Fresno is perhaps Fresno's best-known advocate for urban green space, and Fortune says she is perturbed that City Hall didn't notify her about the May 21 meeting where the council apparently all but sealed the grove's fate. Council members voted 7-0, and no one from the dais or the public expressed any grief over the doomed trees.

Fortune says she and Tree Fresno projects director Ron Nishinaka have studied the grove. The problem with roots, she says, can be easily solved: "Move the sidewalk a little bit."

Fortune says the grove appears healthy. More importantly, she says, the age of some trees is 40 years or more, and that's a key but apparently overlooked part of the debate.

Tree experts have come up with a formula to gauge the economic value of a mature tree, based, among other things, on its contribution to [cleansing and cooling the air](#).

Younger trees have a negative cost-benefit analysis -- they cost more to water and maintain than the return in dollars and cents. In purely economic terms, urban forest managers say, trees are money-losers for their first 20 years of life.

But Eaton Plaza's camphor grove, Fortune says, is in the prime of its economic value. "Tree Fresno is very much concerned with the loss of those trees," she says.

Canopy loss is costly

Some cities have more stringent laws protecting trees.

In Sacramento, for example, citizens may not remove trees of historic, environmental, economic or aesthetic value in that city without a permit. Decisions are subject to hearings and appeals.

Joe Benassini, Sacramento's urban forestry manager, says Sacramento City Hall plays by the same rules on its projects. He says it's never an easy call when the fate of beloved community trees are at stake.

He says the issue isn't merely the trees, but preserving the space dedicated to them. In other words, it's one thing to remove an ailing tree and replace it with another, and something else to cover the site with asphalt.

Benassini also cautions against what he calls the "cumulative loss of canopy." Replacing an old tree with a young tree is a one-for-one exchange in quantity. But the former's majestic, cooling, breathtaking canopy probably required 30 or 40 years of nurture and nature.

Do too many of those old-tree-for-young-tree trade-offs, Benassini says, and a community suffers.

Hal Tokmakian, a member of the Downtown Fresno Coalition, a group of community leaders focused on downtown planning issues, said he supports the city's decision to remove the trees.

He had doubts at first. But, he adds, "for the long run, they have to come out."

Jan Minami, executive director of the Downtown Association of Fresno, says her group will withhold judgment for now: "We're still getting better informed."

Out-of-towner's advice

Tom Kramer needed only seconds to make his decision.

Kramer, his wife, Marlene, and their two sons were traveling from their home in Modesto to Southern California on Friday morning. They pulled into downtown, thinking they could easily find doughnuts, a cool drink and something interesting to do before heading on.

There they were, eating out of the back of their SUV in the Eaton Plaza parking lot on O Street. The Water Tower was closed.

Told that the camphor grove was destined for removal, Kramer took a quick look at it, then shook his head. "Nope. They shouldn't do it. They should work around those trees."

The parking lot was hot and dusty. All the family had wanted, Kramer said, was a pleasant and inviting park.

"Do you have that kind in Fresno?"

Committee seeking money for rail study

By Valerie Gibbons

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Saturday, Aug. 1, 2009

Officials with the county's Rail Advisory Committee are asking for \$1 million in federal money to help study the rail corridor along the eastern side of the Valley and to help buy the line's right-of-way.

Tom Sparks, the chairman of the Tulare County Association of Governments' Rail Advisory Committee, said both Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer have signed on to the appropriation in the federal transportation bill, which is being developed on Capitol Hill this summer.

"I've been in their office so many times I'm sure they don't want to see me anymore," he said. "But we have a lot of hurdles to go."

Sparks, a retired physicist and community volunteer out of Three Rivers, said he and county officials have been meeting with local city councils to update them on the rail plan. The hope is that the councils will sign on, if need be, to any request for federal funding — particularly stimulus funds if they become available for freight rail projects.

"We need to make it clear [to the city councils] that we do not want to operate a railroad," Sparks said. "We just want to preserve the corridor."

Officials are starting with the stretch between Jovista and Strathmore, but long-term plans would link south county cities including Porterville with Dinuba and, eventually, Fresno.

A viable line would lure manufacturers to the area and [reduce air pollution](#), TCAG leaders say. They've flown to Washington, D.C., several times this year to seek the federal help needed to make the rail line attractive to a prospective buyer.

That's the option recommended by a group of MBA students at California State University, Fresno, who said the segment between Jovista and Exeter is not economically viable on its own, but that a rail line between Jovista and Fresno could make a profit.

"The best option for TCAG to preserve the segment of rail that runs through their county is to attract another short line railroad line company and work toward attracting more shipper interest," the plan states. "It is our conclusion that there is not enough business to operate a short-line railroad [south of Exeter] unless more shipper volume is generated."

That price tag could be as much as \$20 million, according to the plan. The tracks have the lowest rating allowed by federal standards and have a top speed of 10 mph. At that speed, the plan says, it would take seven hours for a railroad car to make it from Dinuba to Exeter.

Last year, Measure R was amended to allow the purchase of the line's right of way, which would cost an estimated \$3 million. If the expenditure is ultimately approved no sure thing the money would come not from the road fund but the measure's transit and bike program.

The right of way involves the land beneath the railroad tracks, which is owned by Union Pacific. The actual steel and ties are owned by the San Joaquin Valley Railroad and its parent company, Rail America.

If TCAG decides to move ahead with preserving the corridor, the cities will be asked to approve the \$3 million expenditure specifically for the Strathmore-Jovista right of way.

Cautions raised as summer sports practices begin

By Sarah Reinecke, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, July 31, 2009

As sports practices get under way for the upcoming fall season, coaches are getting a reminder about protecting kids from the heat.

Those coaches say they are mindful of heat conditions and how to practice in them.

Mark Wyatt, director of school support services for the Kern High School District, sent an e-mail to administrators and athletic directors Monday educating them on heat-related illnesses.

Monday was the first official day high school teams could start conditioning without equipment. Wyatt said the district follows heat and [air quality](#) guidelines to keep practice conditions safe.

"I think all the coaches prepare for and understand this is a very hot time of the year," Wyatt said. "Safety is the first thing, that's a priority."

Wyatt said for sports like football, players adjust to using the equipment over a period of 10 days, starting by only wearing helmets and gradually working up to full pads.

Many practices are held in the morning or after 6 p.m. to avoid the sun and heat during the day.

When temperatures reach 105 degrees, Wyatt said no outside practice is allowed from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. If temperatures are above 107 degrees, no outside practice, contests or games can be held.

Wyatt said coaches understand the importance of making sure all players are healthy and hydrated. There are designated water breaks, but Wyatt said players can take water or shade breaks at anytime during practice.

Jessica Hall, 17, started volleyball practice for Foothill High School Monday. Practice is held from 7 to 9 a.m. to avoid the heat. Players run and do core and ab exercises. Hall said they usually take three to five water breaks during practice.

"(The heat) makes you more tired, but you get a better workout, I feel, because the heat makes you sweat more," Hall said.

Leagues for kids younger than high school such as Jack Frost Football League and Golden Empire Youth Tackle Football also follow the district's heat guidelines for practices.

Ron White, executive director of Golden Empire Youth Tackle Football, said they encourage hydration and slow down activity during heat waves. Practice is held in the evening, coaches are educated on the warning signs of heat illness and equipment is introduced gradually.

"It's very challenging -- we live here, it's going to be 105 degrees, it's something we have to deal with," White said.

Tragically, Bakersfield Christian High School had to deal with it when football player Patrick Allen collapsed and died after practicing in 100-plus degree heat.

The coroner said he died of complications from an electrolyte imbalance caused by drinking too much water during exercise and losing too much salt through sweat.

Allen's family never blamed school officials, though,

Judy Goodwill worried at first about her 12-year-old son practicing football on hot summer nights for Jack Frost Football. But so far, Goodwill said the coaches have been great -- taking it slow and allowing plenty of water breaks. She watches every practice from the sidelines and ensures her son wears light clothing and stays hydrated.

Jack Frost Football Head Coach Paul Bobbitt has been coaching for 28 years and says he's never had issues with practicing in the heat. He encourages the kids to let him know if they are not feeling well.

"I keep an eye on the kids," Bobbitt said. "The heat is part of valley football. Games are always hot, so they need to get used to it."

You had stimulus questions, we have answers

By Sarah Reinecke, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009

After The Californian published a story last Sunday about the federal stimulus dollars coming to Kern County, readers contacted us with questions.

Why is so much money going to apartment complexes? Why isn't any going to fix Isabella Dam? Are you sure that's the complete list?

So we sought out answers.

APARTMENTS?

A number of readers asked about five apartment complexes in Kern set to receive about \$39 million total.

Turns out those are low-income housing facilities eligible to apply for tax credits through the California Tax Credit Allocation Committee.

Tax credit programs encourage private investment in affordable rental housing for households meeting certain income requirements.

Developers receiving tax credits then sell them for cash to partly finance housing projects, said Joe DeAnda, spokesman for State Treasurer Bill Lockyer.

Due to the poor economy, DeAnda said, not many people are purchasing tax credits, stymieing projects. California has the largest tax credit program in the nation, and was significantly impacted by this.

So, DeAnda said, the stimulus plan allows developers awarded tax credits in 2007 or 2008 to exchange them for cash from the federal government. It's known as "cash in lieu of credit."

DeAnda said California has already awarded \$325 million in stimulus funds for the program and is expected to issue close to \$1 billion total in stimulus funds for it by the end of the year.

Here are the details of one of the projects:

Andrew Hanna, president of Global Premier Development, said work will start on the 70-unit Sunny View II Apartments in Delano in three to four months. The project is set to receive about \$8 million in stimulus funds from the cash in lieu of credit program.

Hanna said the total cost of the project is \$11.6 million. He expects the work to create 54 direct jobs, resulting in \$1.9 million in wages. He expects it to create 62 indirect jobs, totaling up to \$1.2 million in wages.

Hanna has been trying to finance the low-income housing for four or five years. He said the stimulus funding is a temporary fix for the housing market.

"It was great news, it helped get development on track temporarily," Hanna said. "It's a good thing for jobs and for families who are going to live in these units."

WHAT ABOUT ISABELLA DAM?

The dam project hasn't needed stimulus money, said Tyler M. Stalker, a spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The project received \$8 million for the current fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, and it's in for about \$3.6 million for fiscal year 2010, he said. But there have been requests from the Senate to fund the dam work to full capacity in the coming year -- to \$8 million, Stalker said.

The final amount should be known sometime in September, he said.

The government has been investigating and seeking fixes for seepage discovered at the dam a few years ago. While the Corps has said the dam is safe, it's been considered the "top risk" dam in the Corps inventory.

IS THAT A COMPLETE LIST?

Maybe not.

We ran a list of projects awarded as of July 22, per an online database maintained by the state's California Recovery Task Force. (That's www.recovery.ca.gov).

[Arvin got a \\$650,000 grant for three buses to take workers from Arvin to IKEA, said city Development Associate Mike Kunz.](#) It doesn't appear to be on the state's list (it could always be hidden somewhere), nor did it appear on our list.

State officials say they're constantly updating that database.

Power companies eye region as perfect plant location

by Jennifer Wadsworth, staff writer

Tracy Press, Friday, July 31, 2009

Conditions west of Tracy make the area a magnet for power companies that have proposed building electricity plants that could spew nearly 3,000 tons of pollution a year into the skies.

Cheap land and proximity to major electrical substations, gas lines and water sources have attracted Calpine Corp., Florida Power & Light and Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to the swath of land west of Mountain House on the far eastern edge of Alameda County. The area is centrally located, too, said Jim Swaney, permits manager for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"It's between that Bay Area, Sacramento and Stockton-Tracy-Modesto area," Swaney said. "There's just less distance to the customers who use that energy."

The companies have each applied for state permits to build a power plant, including two that would be among the largest energy suppliers in the state, according to the California Energy Commission.

The Mariposa Energy Project, Tesla Power Plant and East Altamont Energy Center range in size from 200 to more than 1,100 megawatts. A megawatt powers roughly 750 to 1,000 homes, according to the California Independent System Operator, which runs the state electrical grid.

Add to those the fourth full-fledged power plant slated for the area, the GWF Tracy Combined Cycle Power Plant.

GWF Energy LLC — corporate owner of the 7-year-old Tracy Peaker Plant — is poised to begin construction in 2012 to expand from a 169-megawatt station to one with a second turbine that could feed 314 megawatts into the grid.

Together and at maximum permitted capacity, the proposed plants would release more than 700 tons of nitrogen oxide every year, among other pollutants. The combined plants would release about 1,500 tons a year of carbon monoxide, 157 tons of organic emissions, 455 tons of small particulates and nearly 60 tons of sulfur dioxide.

Excluding the GWF Energy expansion project, the proposed power plants would sit in a sparsely populated stretch of Alameda County, which would reap the benefit of millions more dollars in property taxes every year.

But because the prevailing winds blow east, according to the National Weather Service, San Joaquin County residents would bear the brunt of the impacts in the form of thousands more tons of pollution every year, especially over Tracy and Mountain House.

Also, San Joaquin County officials have little control over the Mariposa, Tesla and East Altamont project approvals, because the plants would be in another county's jurisdiction. Though a Tracy-area irrigation district could turn some profit from their construction by selling recycled water to cool the energy-generating turbines.

Powering up and down

The power plants would likely run at much less than their full annual capacity, according to the state energy commission. And though all the power companies applied for the permits to build around Tracy, some might not follow through with those plans.

Calpine, which filed for bankruptcy in 2005, halted construction last year on 33 plants nationwide, including the East Altamont Energy Center poised to sit on 44 acres bordered by Kelso, Mountain House and Byron roads.

In October 2008 year, the state granted Calpine a five-year extension on a 2003 permit to build the 1,100-megawatt energy center. A company spokeswoman contacted this week refused to publicly comment on the project, because plans have yet to be finalized.

Tesla also got a five-year permit extension this year, so it can delay construction until the company is in better financial shape.

GWF Energy has made the most progress in its plans to construct a full-fledged electricity plant on its land a few miles southwest of Tracy. Because it already owns 40 acres on which a part-time, single-turbine power plant sits, it has a little more momentum, according to GWF vice president Doug Wheeler.

The only thing left for GWF Energy to do before construction begins is to work out a few details, like how to use landscaping to disguise the facility from immediate neighbors without violating the California Fish and Game's restriction on planting trees, because they could attract raptors that prey on the endangered kit fox.

The energy company also has to get its plans in closer alignment to the Clean Air Act's provisions on carbon offsets, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. A final report about the peaker plant's expansion plans is set to be released sometime in late summer or early fall.

Once that's approved, the state would hold evidentiary hearings on the project before it could finally grant a permit to build. GWF Energy spokesman Riley Jones said he expects that to happen early next year.

The Mariposa project is the newest among those proposed for the land west of Tracy. The single-turbine, 200-megawatt peaker plant would lie about 7 miles northwest of Tracy and 2½ miles west of Mountain House on a 10-acre chunk of a 160-acre parcel just south of a PG&E substation. The land is on the very eastern edge of Alameda County at the intersection of Bruns and Kelso roads.

PG&E just applied for the state permit to build Mariposa in June, so construction is at least three years away, according to company officials. Of all the proposed plants, San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas said he thinks Mariposa is moving along the fastest.

"The other two, we're not sure we'll ever see those," he said.

To build Mariposa would require a new 580-foot natural gas pipeline and a new 1.8-mile canal to supply water to the plant from the nearby Byron-Bethany Irrigation District.

Tracy activist Bob Sarvey, who keeps a close eye on Bay Area and San Joaquin Valley energy projects, said he worries that the area west of Tracy seems destined to become a corridor for massive power plants.

"The ironic part is that all this power plant development is being licensed in an area known for its renewable energy potential, with massive wind farms dominating the skylines," he pointed out.

Fed grant funds to ease Calif. water shortages

By Garance Burke, Associated Press

In the Washington Post, Friday, July 31, 2009

FRESNO, Calif. -- Federal agencies have pledged to send nearly \$60 million in grants to help California communities, farms and dairies suffering from ongoing water shortages.

It's welcome news for farmers on the west side of Fresno County, the most productive agricultural county in the nation. Farms in the area are receiving only 10 percent of their federal water allocation this year.

The funding announced Thursday includes \$40 million in stimulus money aimed at drought-relief projects, the bulk of which will go to the agriculturally rich San Joaquin Valley, where three years of dry weather and irrigation cutbacks have crippled production and caused severe unemployment.

Most of the Department of Interior's stimulus funds are intended to help growers dig new wells and install temporary pipelines and pumps to move water to farms that need it most, Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes said.

"The farming communities in the San Joaquin are central to our bread basket, to our prosperity and to our agricultural strength as a nation," he said.

The grants, plus other federal funding announced earlier this year, should help put rural communities back to work by freeing up water supplies to keep crops and fruit trees growing, Hayes said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture also announced that it would direct an additional \$18 million in grants to help California farmers, dairy operators and resource conservation districts use water more efficiently and tackle environmental problems.

"Regulations for [air quality](#) and water quality keep getting tougher, so this will be a huge help," said Michael Marsh, CEO of Western United Dairymen.

The biggest winner was the sprawling Westlands Water District, which received a total of \$9.5 million in grants from both agencies.

The district, which produces about \$1 billion in crops annually and is one of Fresno County's biggest employers, says the water shortages have meant hundreds of thousands of acres used to grow lettuce, tomatoes and other crops have been fallowed this year.

The USDA grants will help Westlands farmers save enough water to irrigate 1,000 more acres and put about 800 people to work, said Tom Birmingham, the district's general manager.

More than \$2.2 million will be spent so U.S. Geological Survey scientists can monitor how increased pumping affects California's central aquifer, which some state scientists fear could sink enough to slow delivery of water to Southern California.

The California Aqueduct, a major canal that delivers drinking water to more than 20 million people, is among many structures threatened by the sinking.

A study released by the USGS earlier this month revealed that groundwater pumping is causing the valley floor to sink.

What to Watch

Washington Post, Monday, August 3, 2009

The Environmental Protection Agency holds a public hearing on its proposal to strengthen National Ambient Air Quality Standards for nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), which is produced as a result of gas and diesel-powered vehicle emissions, as well as industrial processes.

In Congress, a Jump-Start for Clunkers

By Matthew L. Wald, staff writer
N.Y. Times, Friday, July 31, 2009

WASHINGTON — As problems go in the nation's capital these days, the White House could live with this one.

Officials at the Transportation Department figured Thursday morning that they had applications in hand for about a tenth of the \$1 billion that Congress set aside for the cash for clunkers program, meant to give rebates to people who turn in old vehicles for new, more fuel-efficient ones.

By late Thursday afternoon, they ran to the White House with news that they might have committed the whole \$1 billion, or even more. This stimulus program had, in fact, stimulated very heavy demand, which required a quick decision about what to do next.

Over the course of 24 hours, the White House changed its mind three times. At first, it said it would shut off the incentives by day's end. Then it let them continue through Friday, and then through Sunday.

On Friday, the House voted to add \$2 billion, soothing the fears of car dealers, who would have been responsible for paying any money they promised to customers as a rebate. But the Senate might not follow suit.

Some senators said Friday that the speed at which the money flew out the door was a sign that the government's deal was too good, and perhaps should be modified.

But still, a question remains: What was behind the apparent last-minute run on the clunker fund?

The answer appears to be a bad mix of paperwork and balky computers.

Around the country, dealers had put off the laborious task of applying for the rebates of \$3,500 or \$4,500, which requires entering the 17-character identification numbers of each vehicle to be scrapped, scanning images of proof of insurance and filling out other paperwork.

The computer system was overloaded, according to the dealers. They said they would finish one page in the application, hit enter and nothing would happen. Eventually a message would appear notifying the dealer that the page had "timed out."

Tom Frew, the business manager at Galpin Motors in Los Angeles, said that he needed 35 tries to register just one of the company's 11 dealerships on the day that the program opened because of problems with the government Web site. On Friday, he spent an hour processing just one rebate application, he said.

"It's probably anywhere from 30- to 60-second delays between mouse clicks," he said. Each application can have up to 11 attachments.

But sitting in front of a computer is not the top priority for most of the company's employees — instead, their job is to "aggressively go out and handle all the customers that are flocking to the showrooms," he said.

The National Automobile Dealers Association told Transportation Department officials on Thursday that its members had submitted about 22,000 applications, but were sitting on tens of thousands more, said Bailey Wood, a spokesman.

"Dealers are interested in one thing, moving metal off their lots, not sitting at the computer and doing data entry," he said.

A Transportation Department official said the agency had already run two instruction classes over the Internet on filling out applications, and was planning a third. A computer contractor, Oracle, has enhanced the capacity of the government Web site.

Cash for clunkers is an unusual government program, because dealers sell the cars, then wait for repayment from Washington. Government officials do not want to commit to more than Congress has appropriated because, under the Anti-Deficiency Act, they can be fired, fined and even jailed for doing that.

Dealers say failure to be reimbursed would be a nightmare for them. At Galpin Motors, Beau Boeckmann, vice president, said his company would try to “unwind” the sale, get the slightly used car back and try to sell it again.

Amid the confusion of Thursday afternoon, when the Transportation Department said the program would end that night, Galpin’s sales staff called anybody who had stopped by their dealerships recently and quickly sold 30 Fords and 20 Hondas.

Mr. Boeckmann said he was relieved that the program would run at least through the weekend; his company was already locked into print and broadcast ads featuring the rebates.

Despite the malfunctions, the House voted 316 to 109 to shift \$2 billion from the Energy Department’s loan fund into the clunker program. Democrats were joined by all the Republicans in the Michigan Congressional delegation, and half of those in Ohio.

The Senate will take up the matter next week. A spirited debate is likely, as some senators have said they will use the opportunity to push for tougher fuel-efficiency requirements. If the Senate does not go along with the House’s version, the House might have to return to work on a compromise.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California, noted that the government had raised the minimum fuel economy for sport utility vehicles and pickups, so that simply junking an older one and buying the 2009 model year could qualify as trading in a clunker. For example, this was true for a Toyota 4-Runner (16 miles per gallon in 2002 and 18 miles per gallon in 2009) and a Chevy Silverado (14 miles per gallon in 2005 and 16 miles per gallon in 2009). But supporters of the program said those trades were unlikely because the market value of the old vehicles exceeded what the government offered for scrapping them.

Mrs. Feinstein and Senator Susan M. Collins of Maine, a Republican, said in a statement, “We will insist that any extension of the program requires that the minimum fuel economy improvement for newly purchased vehicles be at least two miles per gallon higher than it is under the enacted clunkers program.”

Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York also said that the Senate should be open to making the mileage rule stricter. Many environmentalists said the government was getting too little improvement from taxpayer dollars.

President Obama, though, seemed to favor a straightforward extension. “We’re already seeing a dramatic increase in showroom traffic,” he said after the House vote, adding that the program helps to reduce air pollution while helping car buyers.

Robert Gibbs, the chief White House spokesman, offered assurances that the administration was looking for ways to continue the popular new program.

"If you were planning on going to buy a car this weekend using this program, the program continues to run," he said. "If you meet the requirements of the program, the certificates will be honored."

Mr. Gibbs declined to say how long the program could continue without an infusion of money.

But Representative Steve Israel, Democrat of New York, an early advocate of cash for clunkers, said, whatever happened, more would have to be done in September. "We estimated a billion a year," he said. "It's about a billion a month."

Washington sprints to expand cash for clunkers' program

By Margaret Talev, Tony Pugh and David Lightman, McClatchy Newspapers
In the Modesto Bee, Friday, July 31, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Congress and the Obama administration scrambled Friday to triple the size of the overwhelmingly popular "cash for clunkers" program after it appeared to be exhausting its \$1 billion funding in its first week.

The House of Representatives voted 316-109 to put another \$2 billion into the program, taking the money from a stimulus-backed Energy Department loan-guarantee fund. "Consumers have spoken with their wallets," said House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey, D-Wis.

Senators were to consider the extension next week before they leave for their August recess.

President Barack Obama said he supported extending the program, which gives consumers as much as \$4,500 each to put toward fuel-efficient cars when they trade in gas guzzlers.

Obama said that this helped consumers, the environment and the auto industry while reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil. The program aims to yield up to 250,000 trade-ins per \$1 billion in federal assistance.

"Not more than a few weeks ago, there were skeptics who weren't sure that this cash-for-clunkers program would work," the president said. "I'm happy to report that it has succeeded well beyond our expectations and all expectations, and we're already seeing a dramatic increase in showroom traffic at local car dealers."

Marc Cannon, a spokesman for AutoNation, said the program had showrooms hopping at the company's 239 dealership locations in 15 states. AutoNation dealerships have sold 3,000 cars under the program and showroom traffic is up 36 percent.

"We're seeing a tremendous amount of interest," Cannon said. "It's like people have been given permission to shop for a car. It's a huge psychological boost."

Most buyers are either pre-qualified with credit, are paying cash or have credit union backing, Cannon said. Buyers with poor credit, however, are having a tough time because credit is still tight.

Amid the excitement, a vehicle finance advocacy group dubbed AWARE - Americans Well-informed on Automobile Retailing Economics - said that consumers shouldn't lose sight of getting the best financing deals they can. The group offers a budgeting calculator and advice on contracts and negotiations on its Web site, www.AutoFinancing101.org.

The Federal Trade Commission, meanwhile, warned consumers to steer clear of bogus "cash for clunker" Web sites that ask for personal information, supposedly to register for the program. Such scams typically are used for identity theft and related crimes.

There's only one official government Web site for the program, www.cars.gov. The site doesn't ask for personal information. Consumers who find bogus "cash for clunkers" Web sites that seek personal information should notify the FTC at www.ftc.gov, or 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357).

Extending the program in its current form isn't without controversy.

Frustrated dealers have said that they find the regulations and voucher submission processes unclear or that they haven't been reimbursed yet.

Some lawmakers don't like the idea of redirecting stimulus spending. Some business experts would prefer to see lower vouchers that covered more cars.

Some environmentalists think that the program should push buyers only into very fuel-efficient cars, although House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Friday that "the cars that have been purchased are much more fuel-efficient and the emissions standards are much better than the bill even required, and that is good news."

Consumer advocates worry that the lower-income drivers who could benefit most from the vouchers aren't qualifying to buy new cars, while some Republicans are critical of the government playing favorites with its aid to businesses or about yet more federal spending in light of the burgeoning federal budget deficit.

"I don't like the idea of spending money we don't have," said House Republican Conference Chairman Mike Pence of Indiana. "At the end of the day, we've got to get away from this gimmicky approach to economic stimulus. To encourage people to buy a car is like spending money for bailouts to car companies."

But Rep. Artur Davis, D-Ala., said the auto industry still needed help and that there was bipartisan consensus that this program was a good way to do that.

"A number of conservative Republicans in my district said they liked it," Davis said. "When I see conservative Republicans, who have been bashing everything that comes out of this administration, asking, 'Where's my cash-for-clunker money?' then I think this program must be good."

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, a powerful business lobby, sent a letter to all senators urging them to vote for the expansion. "The 'cash for clunkers' program can provide an important environmental benefit while assisting an industry in crisis," said the letter, signed by R. Bruce Josten, an executive vice president at the chamber.

John McEleney, a multi-franchise dealer in Iowa and the chairman of the National Automobile Dealers Association, said Friday that "without question, the cash-for-clunkers program has been very successful in accomplishing its goal of boosting new car and truck sales."

Feds seek to dismiss probe of clean truck program

The Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Friday, July 31, 2009

LOS ANGELES -- Federal port regulators are seeking to drop an investigation into portions of the clean truck program at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

A Federal Maritime Commission spokeswoman said Friday that the agency filed a motion this week to dismiss the probe. Last September, the agency sought to halt portions of the program, which is aimed at reducing diesel emissions at the ports by replacing older trucks with cleaner models.

The FMC was concerned that parts of the plan, such as requiring independent truckers to become employees of trucking companies, would reduce competition. The motion says those concerns "now appear in a different light" after the program began last October.

An administrative law judge certified the motion Thursday. FMC secretary Karen Gregory said the full commission will decide whether to dismiss the probe.

El Paso Electric fined for air violations

The Associated Press

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Friday, July 31, 2009

SUNLAND PARK, N.M.—A state district court on Friday approved a settlement that requires Texas-based El Paso Electric Co. to pay a \$250,000 penalty for air quality violations at its power plant in southern New Mexico.

The settlement also requires El Paso Electric to provide \$275,000 for supplemental environmental projects, including the installation of a flue gas recirculation system to reduce emissions at the Rio Grande Electric Power Generating Station.

Environment Secretary Ron Curry said the agreement, known as a consent decree, is designed to provide safeguards to protect regional air quality.

"We fought to ensure the company invests in supplemental environmental projects that will directly benefit the residents of Dona Ana County by providing for the reduction of harmful air pollution in the area," Curry said.

The agreement also calls for El Paso Electric to tune up its boilers at the plant. However, that's something the utility was planning as part of its annual maintenance, said Andy Ramirez, vice president for power generation.

The Environment Department filed a complaint against El Paso Electric last fall, alleging the plant exceeded emission rates for nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide.

But El Paso Electric argued that the plant was not in violation. Ramirez said the utility and the state differed in their interpretations of the emission limits and the calibration of the plant's equipment.

Ramirez said the consent decree spells out what is required at the plant to prevent any future disagreements.

The plant's three units can generate 246 MW of electricity. They run primarily on natural gas, but fuel oil is stored at the site as a backup.

Report shows how Santa Clara stadium for 49ers would affect traffic, air quality, noise

By Mike Swift, Mercury News

In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, July 31, 2009

On any given Sunday, about 19,000 cars could pour into town for a pro football game at Santa Clara's proposed stadium. The first 1,000 would arrive early so fans can put in up to five hours of tailgating.

Only two major intersections would see significant traffic backups for Sunday NFL games. But for Monday Night Football or other weeknight events, noise, air pollution and traffic would have a much more significant impact in Santa Clara north of Highway 101, according to a massive new environmental study of the project.

And if the Raiders or another NFL team decides to join the 49ers on the move to the South Bay — as the NFL is encouraging — a busy schedule of pro football games, concerts and other events would generate significant noise up to 46 times a year.

For both stadium supporters and opponents, the massive environmental impact report the city of Santa Clara released Thursday contains copious factual ammunition to argue the merits or the shortcomings of the \$937 million project that is slated to open in 2014.

The draft environmental report provides the first quantifiable measure for how a 68,500-seat stadium would affect the surrounding neighborhoods and streets — in terms of noise, traffic, air pollution and even the shadow cast by the 200-foot-tall behemoth on a December afternoon.

While the report cites a "significant" impact on air pollution, noise and traffic, it also notes an absence of significant conflicts and problems in many areas — including soil pollution, operations at Mineta San Jose International Airport, local businesses near the stadium, endangered species such as the burrowing owl, and earthquake engineering.

"I don't see any showstoppers," said Assistant City Manager Ron Garratt, who compared the physical impact of the stadium to that of a large office complex of 2 million to 3 million square feet.

"The unique aspect about this that's different is that you're inviting 68,000 people into your community over a compressed amount of time, Garratt said, "so the traffic management "... and an efficient parking program are going to be paramount."

Stadium opponents countered that the report highlights many likely problems. They say it proves that traffic problems would be major, particularly for a weeknight event, and they argue that projections that one in five fans in drive-your-own-car Silicon Valley would arrive by train, bus or light rail are unrealistic.

"We are being asked to pay \$114 million for an environmentally inferior project," said Bill Bailey, treasurer of Santa Clara Plays Fair, referring to the maximum amount of Santa Clara redevelopment, hotel tax and utility fund dollars that could be earmarked for the stadium.

What the report does not do is treat the stadium as belonging exclusively to the 49ers. With the National Football League asking the 49ers and the Oakland Raiders to consider a two-team option, the environmental report treats the stadium as a two-team venue in terms of its physical impact on roads, waterways and the air.

The report was assembled by consultants hired and directed by the city, although the 49ers will pay the bill — a price tag that could top \$1 million but was not available Thursday.

Two of the organizations most affected by the report — the 49ers and Cedar Fair Entertainment, the owner of Great America amusement park — declined to comment Thursday, saying it will take awhile to plow through a report that runs thousands of pages.

The release of the report starts a 45-day clock during which the public can submit written comments. Ultimately, Santa Clara's City Council and Planning Commission will hold public meetings on the report, and the council must approve it before the issue goes to the voters for a binding decision next year.

Among the "significant unavoidable impacts," according to the report:

- Air pollution would exceed regional standards.
- Substantial increase in ambient noise due to events 46 times a year.
- On weekdays, substantial increase in traffic at 17 intersections in Santa Clara, San Jose, Sunnyvale and Milpitas about eight times a year due to NFL games, as well as concerts and other events.

While 19 percent of fans would use transit in Santa Clara compared with just 8 percent who go to 49ers games at Candlestick Park in San Francisco, 49ers games at the new stadium would generate a net increase of 421 tons of carbon dioxide a year. That is the equivalent to the amount of the greenhouse gas emitted by one year of energy use by about 38 homes, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Santa Clara Planning Director Kevin Riley said the city needed to evaluate a two-team stadium, should the NFL decide that it only wants to help finance one new stadium in the Bay Area.

"The way we understand it from the NFL, they are looking at funding these things if there can be efficiency of use," Riley said. In New York, the league provided an unprecedented \$300 million in financing for a stadium that will be shared by the Giants and the Jets when it opens in 2010.

One environmental problem that has surfaced in other development proposals such as San Jose's Coyote Valley — protection of habitat for the endangered burrowing owl — isn't an issue for the stadium.

A naturalist last year combed the 22-acre site — currently a paved parking lot — in a search for burrows made by California ground squirrels, which are used as nesting or roosting sites by the rare owl.

The result — nada.

"The site is dominated by asphalt," a naturalist concluded. "Burrowing owls and burrowing owl habitat are absent from this site."

Report outlines impact of new Santa Clara stadium

The Associated Press

San Diego Union-Tribune, Friday, July 31, 2009

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Santa Clara city leaders will have some more things to think about as they consider a new stadium for the San Francisco 49ers.

A draft environmental report says a proposed 68,500-seat stadium in Santa Clara for the 49ers would significantly increase traffic, noise and air pollution on game days and during other events.

The report was posted to the Santa Clara city Web site Thursday. It recommends officials encourage fans and stadium workers to use public transportation. The report also recommends limits on tailgating.

The Santa Clara City Council must approve the environmental report before a referendum on a new stadium can be put to a public vote.

City officials are aiming for a vote next year.

Report: California must adapt to changing climate

By Samantha Young, Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Monday, Aug. 3, 2009

SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- Even if the world is successful in cutting carbon emissions in the future, California needs to start preparing for rising sea levels, hotter weather and other effects of climate change, a new state report recommends.

It encourages local communities to rethink future development in low-lying coastal areas, reinforce levees that protect flood-prone areas and conserve already strapped water supplies.

"We still have to adapt, no matter what we do, because of the nature of the greenhouse gases," said Tony Brunello, deputy secretary for climate change and energy at the California Natural Resources Agency, who helped prepare the report. "Those gases are still going to be in the atmosphere for the next 100 years."

The draft report to be released Monday by the California Natural Resources Agency provides the state's first comprehensive plan to work with local governments, universities and residents to deal

with a changing climate. A final plan is expected to be released in the fall after the public weighs in.

The report was compiled after Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger directed agencies in November to devise a state climate strategy. It comes three years after the Republican governor signed California's landmark global warming law requiring the state to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 2020.

Most countries have focused on cutting greenhouse gases in the future, but researchers say those efforts will take decades to have an effect while the planet continues to warm. States have only recently begun to look at what steps they must take to minimize the damage expected from sea level rise, storm surges, droughts and water shortages because of the climate changes.

Over the last century in California, the sea level has risen by 7 inches, average temperatures have increased, spring snowmelt occurs earlier in the year, and there are hotter days and fewer cold nights.

The report warns that rising temperatures over the next few decades will lead to more heat waves, wildfires, droughts and floods.

"We have to deal with those unavoidable impacts," said Suzanne Moser, a research associate at the Institute of Marine Sciences at the University of California Santa Cruz. "We can't pretend they are not going to happen and we have to prepare for that."

To minimize the potential damage from climate change, the report recommends that cities and counties offer incentives to encourage property owners in high-risk areas to relocate and limit future development in places that might be affected by flooding, coastal erosion and sea level rise. State agencies also should not plan, permit, develop or build any structure that might require protection in the future.

The report suggests the state partner with local governments and private landowners to create large reserves that protect wildlife threatened by warmer weather. Similarly, wetlands and fish corridors should be established to protect salmon and other fragile fish.

The report says farmers should be encouraged to be more efficient when watering their crops, and investments should be made to improve crop resistance to hotter temperatures.

Forest Service allows controlled burns in state again

By Matt Weiser

Modesto Bee, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009

The U.S. Forest Service is again allowing controlled fires in California, after a ban last month in response to air quality concerns and personnel limitations.

The ban on such fires, revealed by The Bee two weeks ago, drew criticism from groups representing Forest Service professionals.

Critics said the ban effectively required that every fire be aggressively extinguished, forsaking a new policy that encourages some fires to burn in order to thin overgrown forests. They also feared it would subject firefighters to unnecessary risks by requiring suppression in every case.

In a new memo to federal forest managers dated Aug. 15, Regional Forester Randy Moore announced he would again consider approving such fires because "fire activity and air quality conditions have generally improved since July 9."

Controlled fires go by two names: "wildland fire use," where naturally caused wildfires are monitored and allowed to burn under certain conditions; and prescribed burns – fires intentionally set to minimize a future threat.

"This is wonderful news," said Timothy Ingalsbee, executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics and Ecology. "Wildland fire use, hands down, is safer for firefighters, less costly for

taxpayers and less damaging to the land," he added. "Every fire should be examined for the opportunity to manage for social and ecological benefits."

Moore banned both types of fires last month throughout California's federal forests, citing a "preparedness level" rating system that indicated fire crews were stretched thin.

Ingalsbee and other critics called the decision ironic, since full suppression requires more personnel.

"Rather than require local units to wait until the preparedness level has been reduced," Moore wrote, "I have decided to again consider (controlled fires) on a case-by-case basis."

Forest Service spokesman John Heil said California faced an "epic" fire situation after June 21, when lightning storms triggered thousands of fires. This spread crews thin and made smoke a health concern in many communities.

Moore originally said he would reconsider the ban if conditions changed. Heil said Moore's latest directive reflects that change since many fires have been contained and smoky conditions have lifted.

"We have a lot fewer fires going on right now than we did back on July 9," Heil said. "So, a lot of things have improved at this point."

Doctors put asthma care on back-to-school checklist

By Marissa Lang, staff writer

Sacramento Bee and Modesto Bee, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009

This is the time of summer kids hate most: School doesn't start for a few weeks, but parents are already getting them ready for the return to campus.

There are the ubiquitous back-to-school sales and planning the to-and-from school routes.

This year, physicians want to add another item to the checklist: Parents should take a moment to consider their child's health – especially if they have asthma.

Returning to school during August and September can be detrimental to the health of asthmatic children, doctors said, especially if parents aren't aware of the risks.

Dr. Arif Seyal, allergy specialist with Kaiser Permanente in Rancho Cordova, said she sees a spike in the number of children with asthma-related problems in the first month of school.

"In August and September, we've totally forgotten that allergy season is not completely over," Seyal said. "And, of course, the weather drives asthma, but there's also an increased risk of contracting a viral infection, which tends to cause more problems for kids with asthma."

Asthma is incurable. It causes air passages in a person's lungs to swell, narrowing or blocking airflow. In an asthma attack, the chest can tighten, often leaving sufferers feeling as if they're unable to take in enough air. Some attacks can be life-threatening.

"There's no history of asthma in my family," said Kori Titus, CEO of Breathe California, whose 7-year-old daughter, Ashton, was just diagnosed with the disease. "With all the heat and air quality issues we encounter, it really is an epidemic we have in the Valley."

Asthma locally is worsened by the Sacramento Valley's bowl-like geography and long-standing problems with air pollution and smog.

Yet asthma is a national problem.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, asthma is the most common chronic illness in American children, with the highest rate of prevalence among those 5 to 17 years old. As a result, the CDC reported, asthma is one of the most common causes of school absences.

In 2003, the last year for which numbers are available, school-age children who reported at least one asthma attack during the year missed a total of 12.8 million school days due to the disease.

Seyal said parents need to ready themselves and their children for school by figuring out their asthma triggers. Tests can identify what might start an attack. Parents should also have affected children take daily doses of airway controller medications.

She said parents should also make sure children are taking basic measures to prevent the spread of germs.

"We don't tend to recognize that viral infections can be a cause of asthma," Seyal said. "When kids go back to school, kids are in constant contact with each other – and with each other's germs."

"First of all, parents need to advocate for their children," Titus said. "But teachers need to be educated about how to recognize asthma attacks and what to do when a child is having one. They're our first line of defense. We need to make sure our kids are being taken care of."

Nissan rolls out electric car at new headquarters

By Yuri Kageyama, Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009

YOKOHAMA, Japan -- Nissan Chief Executive Carlos Ghosn drove quietly out of the Japanese automaker's soon-to-open headquarters Sunday in the first public viewing of its new zero-emission vehicle.

It was the first time the external design was shown of Nissan Motor Co.'s environmentally friendly electric automobile, set to go on sale in Japan, the U.S. and Europe next year. The blue hatchback had a sporty design and a recharging opening in the front.

Designer Shiro Nakamura said the vehicle was designed to avoid a stereotypical futuristic design.

"This is not a niche car," he said. "We didn't make it unusual looking. It had to be a real car."

Nissan has promised that the Leaf, which goes into mass-production as a global model in 2012, will be about the same price as a gas-engine car such as the 1.5 million yen (\$15,000) Tiida, which sells abroad as the Versa, starting at about \$10,000.

Ghosn drove out on stage with former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi sitting next to him, and with a Yokohama governor and mayor in the rear seats.

"This car represents a real breakthrough," Ghosn told reporters and guests at a showroom in the new headquarters.

He said the new car and new office building in Yokohama, southwest of Tokyo, marked two fresh starts for Nissan, which hopes to take the lead in zero-emission vehicles.

Nissan, which has an alliance with Renault SA of France, has fallen behind Japanese rivals Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co. in gas-electric hybrids that have become increasingly popular recently.

Nissan said the new 22-story headquarters was designed to be sufficiently energy efficient to qualify as one of the most ecological buildings in Japan. The company, which is losing money amid the global downturn, is selling its old Tokyo headquarters as part of efforts to cut costs.

Koizumi said environmentally friendly auto technology is key to Japan's economic growth.

"It was so unexpectedly smooth and quiet," he said after getting out of the car. "I am sure this car is going to be popular."

[Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald commentary, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009:](#)

Readers Forum: Lawsuit has cost community much

By Nate Bates

California's unemployment rate has climbed to 11.5 percent, the worst since before World War II. It is painfully higher in Richmond.

In yet another blow to working families, a lawsuit filed by Communities for a Better Environment, West County Toxics Coalition and the Asian Pacific Environmental Network has stopped the Richmond Renewal project at the Chevron Refinery.

The project was providing 1,300 good-paying, construction jobs — a real economic stimulus. Now all of those workers no longer have jobs and are left wondering how they will put food on their tables and provide health care for their families.

But the losses do not stop there. In addition to those jobs, Richmond loses a \$61.6 million community benefits agreement with Chevron that would have helped address key problems in our city such as limited vocational education or hands-on job training opportunities, lack of access to health care, and public safety dangers. But because of Communities for a Better Environment's lawsuit, the funding to address these critical needs is no more.

Ex-offenders, high-school dropouts and discouraged job seekers find it particularly difficult to gain employment. One of the local nonprofits that has created job opportunities for these people is called RICHMOND BUILD, a 12-week, nonprofit, pre-apprenticeship program that trains participants in green-collar careers. The program mentors participants and helps them secure employment once their training is complete. The community-benefits package funding to support it is no more.

In addition to employment challenges, too many families suffer from a lack of access to health care. The \$6 million in funding that would have gone to the Brookside Health Clinic is also no more. This facility provides services to low-income residents, and is in high demand as more people lose their jobs and health insurance.

The community cannot truly prosper until families feel safe raising their children. Therefore, a significant amount of the package was dedicated to working with the police department to increase the number of officers on the streets and develop a crime prevention strategy. Funding allocated to staffing and training at the city's fire department is also no more.

Another public safety issue revolves around the Bay Trail, which currently has a dangerous "missing link" that forces pedestrians and bikers to take a detour onto I-580. The benefits agreement included grants for a land easement and construction of the final piece of the trail.

To make the community-benefits agreement all-encompassing, the Richmond Community Fund was established and was to provide \$10 million to 501 (c) non-profit groups. A Community Fund Advisory Committee, comprised of council members and local residents, would award discretionary grants to other worthy community projects. Now that funding has been lost.

I am truly heartbroken when I think of all the people who could have received so many benefits from this project. My city — our city — deserves so much better.

I'm not talking about sacrificing air quality or public health for jobs and investment in the Richmond community. Despite the confusion the Communities for a Better Environment and others have created, an almost four-year review of the project by the city of Richmond, along with outside experts and the state attorney general's office, Bay Area Air Quality Management District — the public agency charged with protecting the air in our community — concluded the project would reduce emissions from the refinery — meaning the air we breathe will be cleaner.

By stopping this project, Communities for a Better Environment, West County Toxics Coalition and the Asia Pacific Environmental Network will have killed 1,300 jobs, eliminated \$61 million in

spending on programs that help Richmond residents and prevented the refinery from making upgrades to its equipment that would actually improve air quality in our community. Given the economic and social challenges we face, community leaders who care about Richmond should be doing everything in our power to maintain existing jobs and create new ones — not take them away as a long-time Richmond resident, I know where my heart lies on this issue, and as one councilmember, I will do everything I can to ensure that this city receives the benefits it so richly deserves.

Bates is a member of the Richmond City Council.

[Sacramento Bee commentary, Monday, Aug. 3, 2009:](#)

California should revive nuclear energy option

By Christine Todd Whitman

Given the fiscal challenges facing California, there will be great temptation to put on hold any major new projects. It's important to remember, however, that postponing spending commitments doesn't mean they disappear; rather, costs rise even higher later while the needs remain.

As they re-examine options, this is an opportune time for California's legislators to address a continuing problem for the growing state and take a longer view of the state's energy policies. With the added financial imperative of making the most cost-efficient investment in California's energy infrastructure, perhaps it is time to rethink the state's position on new nuclear power plants.

By 2030, America is going to need 20 percent more electricity. This requires that we invest in new electricity generating capacity to keep pace as a burgeoning population demands new schools, roads and health care facilities. Our energy challenge is compounded by our need to produce electricity in cleaner and more sustainable ways. California's adoption of rigorous goals for renewable energy generation shows that it takes this responsibility seriously.

But California legislators need to listen to their constituents when it comes to one promising solution: emissions-free nuclear energy. For the first time in more than 30 years, a majority of California's registered voters approve of building new reactors in the state, according to a Field Poll conducted last year.

That majority knows that no other large-scale base electricity source is doing as much to rid our atmosphere of harmful pollutants. Nuclear power accounts for nearly 75 percent of the clean energy produced in the United States.

Because they produce no greenhouse gases, America's 104 nuclear reactors helped avoid the emission of almost 700 million metric tons of carbon dioxide last year. You would have to remove 99 percent of all passenger cars from our roads and highways to achieve the same result.

The majority of Californians also understand that while construction of new reactors is costly, the economic benefits are long-lived.

Nuclear power easily beats fossil fuels in price on an ongoing operating basis, which is the best way to measure whether energy investments are worth it. In 2007, U.S. utilities spent an average of only 1.76 cents to produce each kilowatt-hour from nuclear energy. By comparison, it cost 6.78 cents for each kilowatt-hour from natural gas and 10.26 cents for petroleum. It is clear that nuclear is the most cost-competitive base load power source, and the financial advantage will only increase if federal constraints on greenhouse gases are imposed, as Obama's administration has committed to do. And because nuclear plants refuel every 18 to 24 months, they help guard consumers against rate shocks triggered by gyrating natural gas and oil prices.

In this way, building a nuclear plant involves the same sort of calculation that goes into buying an energy-saving compact fluorescent light bulb -- it costs more at the counter, but it more than pays for itself over the life of the bulb.

Communities where reactors are built realize a more immediate boost. Each new reactor requires as many as 2,400 workers in peak construction periods, according to the Clean and Safe Energy Coalition, which I chair with Greenpeace co-founder Patrick Moore. This would be welcome news to the skilled tradesmen who have been made idle by California's decision to halt public works projects.

Once operable, 400 to 700 full-time positions would need to be filled. These jobs pay substantially more than average salaries in areas where plants are located, and they cannot be sent offshore. All told, each nuclear plant generates an estimated \$430 million in a year in total output for the local community.

With that combination of economic growth and environmental responsibility, it's no wonder a majority of Californians support lifting the ban on new nuclear plants. It's an opportune time for California's elected leaders to heed the call and take steps now to head off potential energy and environment headaches down the road.

Problems ignored never go away. They just come back bigger and costlier.

Christine Todd Whitman is the former governor of New Jersey and Environmental Protection Agency administrator. She is now the co-chair of the Clean and Safe Energy Coalition.

[O.C. Register commentary, Friday, July 31, 2009:](#)

Newport studying effects of jet fuel residue on areas near JWA

Food for Thought

By Barbara Venezia

When I first moved to Santa Ana Heights in 1993, I was puzzled by the mysterious black soot collecting on my patio furniture. Nothing like this ever graced my backyard in Laguna Niguel. I started obsessing on keeping the furniture clean and was surprised when my neighbor explained the stuff falling from the sky was residue from jet fuel.

Each week I'd be out there, rag in hand, trying to stay ahead of it. I'm not sure when it happened, but the soot worsened and now cleaning is on the daily to-do list. I'm more obsessed with the gross gunk than before and even developed my own cleaning technique to battle this nastiness. I wipe the majority of the dust away with a dry paper towel to avoid a muddy mess, and then clean with Formula 409 spray.

I stopped using rags a few years ago when I found I could no longer get them clean. Seems no matter how much I bleached and pre soaked, they were permanently stained by this black dust. That's when I started to wonder, "If this crud's doing this to a rag, who knows what it's doing to everything in its path, me included!"

Apparently I'm not the only one wondering if what's falling from the sky is harmful. The city of Newport Beach, along with airport consultant Tom Edwards, is spearheading an approximately \$52,000 study to be conducted by noted scientist Dr. Karleen Boyle-Sudol. The study hopes to answer the environmental impact questions regarding the pollution coming from the estimated 150 jets that pass over head from JWA each day.

The study proposes a detailed air sampling using EPA approved MiniVols (air samplers placed in certain locations) to measure "ambient particulate air pollution and associated polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons ("PAHs") and heavy metals." Six MiniVols will be placed near the airport from Santa Ana Heights Fire Station to the beach in Newport.

"Dr. Boyle's study at LAX used a similar design and did find statistically significant differences between the amount of particle-bound heavy metals in air samples near the airport vs. samples adjacent to a freeway with a high volume of diesel truck traffic."

According to www.californiaskywatch.com (a website dedicated to preserving a healthy environment), jet emission pollutants contain ozone, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds, which can cause health issues affecting the eyes, cardiovascular system, lungs and even premature mortality.

So what happens if the science comes back proving these toxins are slowly poisoning us? Will JWA shut down? Tom Edwards says "No. However the county will have to deal with the issue of future expansion and its impacts as well as incorporating certain mitigating measures to deal with the impacts established by the base line of actual data."

But could this be the answer to curtailing expansion of JWA and renegotiating the settlement agreement sooner than later? Or could this backfire as property values plummet once word is out that living the dream in Newport is actually a nightmare of potential health issues down the road? Either way I guess I still have to keep cleaning my patio furniture!

Freelance writer Barbara Venezia's opinion column appears online and in The Current every Friday.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Friday, July 31, 2009:](#)

A few good days in August would help

By Mark Grossi

A few good days this August might make this the cleanest summer on record for ozone pollution. The Valley averages three to four good days each August.

But here's an oddity: The cleanest summer on record was 2005 when there were no good days in August.

Another odd statistic: In 1999, one of the more unhealthy summers in the last decade, there were nine good days.

[Modesto Bee guest editorial, Friday, July 31, 2009:](#)

Cash for Clunkers is an effective driver of greener car sales

The following editorial appeared in the Kansas City Star on Thursday, July 30:

The "Cash for Clunkers" program unveiled recently has a good shot at accomplishing its big goals.

The program will help the environment by getting up to 250,000 older passenger cars, sport utility vehicles and trucks off American roads. They will be replaced with far more fuel-efficient models, which will reduce harmful emissions belched into the air for many years.

And consumers benefit because they are getting up to \$4,500 from the federal government to trade in older model, low-mileage vehicles. It's an attractive way to slice the purchase price of a new vehicle.

The \$1 billion plan will be a boon for motorists because they will spend far less money on fuel for their newer vehicles, a savings that will accumulate long into the future.

And, the program - officially called CARS or Car Allowance Rebate System - will inject some much-needed life into the U.S. automobile industry.

Dealers across the nation this week have reported larger-than-usual crowds of people kicking the tires and looking into buying new vehicles. Manufacturers and dealers also have wisely stepped forward with incentives of their own, trying to attract more buyers into the showrooms.

Given the huge investment by the federal government (in other words, by American taxpayers) in General Motors and Chrysler, the program could have the effect of boosting the futures of both

companies. They need more sales to generate enough profits to keep even their reduced number of assembly lines busy in the future.

Consumers who want to take advantage of the cash assistance deal for new cars have to move relatively quickly and make sure they understand the rules. Help is available on the Web and on the showroom floor. The government has said it will spend the billion dollars on the program or pull the plug on it by November - whichever comes first.

Judging by the initial enthusiastic reaction, the government won't have much trouble giving away the taxpayer funds. By Wednesday, more than \$150 million had been allocated to new car buyers.

There's already talk about a second, similar effort in 2010. However, federal officials ought to see exactly how Cash for Clunkers works out over the coming few months before renewing it.

Some auto experts have questioned how many extra old vehicles the program will take off the roads beyond what would normally occur.

Congress also should look at whether a future program could be less costly to taxpayers by reducing the amount of money offered for clunkers.

At this point, though, it appears Americans are eagerly taking advantage of a well-timed opportunity to slip behind the wheel of a newer - and cheaper - vehicle.

[Tracy Press editorial, Friday, July 31, 2009:](#)

Our Voice: More power to the peaker plant

Since 2002, GWF Energy LLC has operated the Tracy Peaker Plant on the western fringe of Tracy. We supported it when it opened, and we support it now as its owners seek to upgrade the facility to produce more power more efficiently.

To recall why it originally earned our approval, take a step into the Not Too Way Back Machine.

In 2000 and 2001, electricity was a hard thing to come by in California. The shenanigans of Enron energy traders and a lack of new power plants led to rolling blackouts, outraging the public and helping cost Gov. Gray Davis his job.

The Tracy plant was designed to fire up when needed, zapping up to 169 megawatts — enough to power more than 125,000 homes — into the grid when demand for electricity was high. It made sense at the time, even if more than a few people didn't want a power plant for a neighbor.

What's going on now makes sense, too.

GWF Energy wants to take the fossil fuel-burning plant to full-time status, up its peak operating capacity to 314 megawatts and reduce its relative impact on the environment.

Though it will run for more hours and emit more total pollutants, the revamped power plant will be much cleaner per hour run than it is now, a better energy bang for the ecological buck.

The fact is, the future of California needs more power production, and since we're not ready for an all-out switch to renewable energy, fossil fuel-fired plants will be a part of that future. Making these facilities as efficient and productive as possible is simply sound energy policy. (Building more nuclear facilities would be too, but that's another discussion.)

The peaker plant's new incarnation will also be a boon for the local economy. Company officials say 17 full-time workers will be hired to staff the new plant — a welcome prospect even if the place isn't fully operational for a few years.

In fact, it's hard to find more than a handful of objectors to this proposal.

One of them, Tracy Hills, is concerned about its proposed development's view of 30 extra feet of exhaust stacks. GWF Vice President Doug Wheeler says his company's trying to find a solution to that worry.

The other is the Tusso family, local landowners who say the facility already degrades their quality of life.

We sympathize with the Tusos, but the reality stacks up against them.

The plant is already there, and GWF owns the place. Plus, the facility counts as neighbors the Owens-Brockway glass manufacturing plant and the Nutting-Rice warehouse, with the biomass power plant about a half-mile to the northwest. It's an area for industry, and an improved power plant fits in nicely.

The company has also fit well with our community. GWF has bought buses for Tracy Unified School District, runs a lawn mower replacement program and is working with city staff to get a solar farm on 200 acres of land off Schulte Road. And when it comes to offsetting pollution, GWF has agreed with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to be cleaner than regulations require.

The final step between GWF and firing up its revamped plant in 2013, according to Wheeler, is for the California Energy Commission to give its approval.

[Letter to the S.F. Chronicle, Sat., Aug. 1, 2009:](#)

Oakland's dirty air can lead to heart disease

It is about time that the Port of Oakland, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the California Resources Board do something to reverse the decades of pollution the residents of West Oakland have had to endure ("Program to clean up trucks, air quality," July 28).

As your article stated, diesel particulates can cause asthma, cancer and reproductive harm. West Oakland has long led Alameda County in incidence of these harmful diseases.

However, one crucial harmful effect of diesel particulates was omitted. Exposure to airborne pollution, such as that from diesel and gasoline vehicles, increases the risk of heart disease and stroke, according to the American Heart Association.

Short-term exposure can trigger acute cardiovascular events such as heart attack and irregular heart rhythms. Long-term exposure may accelerate the progression of atherosclerosis and exacerbate the health problems associated with it. West Oakland has some of the highest rates of coronary heart disease in Alameda County.

Clean air in West Oakland will save residents' health and lives.

*Gordon Fung, M.D.
Clinical professor of medicine, UCSF*

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009:](#)

Take a cue from reaction to volcanic dust

Recently The Californian ran an article about the San Joaquin Valley Air Control District's concern with the dust problems in the valley. I'm sure that their concern will generate numerous studies,

spend thousands of dollars in consultant fees and then be put on hold because of problems that have more political clout in the north end of the valley.

If the SJVACD really wants to get serious about dust abatement, the Washington state forestry service could be helpful. These people understand dust control. After Mount St. Helens erupted in 1980, the forestry service used a non-petroleum based, biodegradable, EPA-approved product called Polybinder on the road shoulders for dust and ash abatement.

There are solutions to the dust problems, but nothing much will happen until the SJVACD decides to do something more than just talk. Dust is a major problem in our end of the valley. Dust affects the health of tens of thousands of its citizens and should be made a number one priority with the SJVACD.

This problem is past the talking stage. It is time for the SJVACD to take decisive action and do what they should have done years ago.

Lee Persinger, Bakersfield

[Letter to the N.Y. Times, Sat., Aug. 1, 2009:](#)

The Climate Change Bill

Re "[Climate Loopholes](#)" (editorial, July 22):

It's good to see The Times casting a critical eye on the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade bill. Letting coal-fired power plants off the hook would certainly be a big step backward in efforts to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Bogus offsets will also allow polluters to game the system as the world heats up.

The closer we look at this legislation, the more apparent it becomes that we have hitched our climate-control wagon to the wrong horse. Even if we achieve the reductions in carbon dioxide called for in this bill — an uncertain prospect — it will be too little and too late.

An analysis by the Carbon Tax Center shows that a steadily rising tax on carbon emissions over the next decade will yield far greater reductions in carbon dioxide levels. Revenue from such a tax could be returned to Americans through payroll or income tax cuts to balance higher energy costs.

The carbon tax-and-dividend is simpler and more effective than cap-and-trade. As you so aptly concluded in your editorial, the "Senate Democrats should not settle for half-measures."

Charles Komanoff
Co-director, Carbon Tax Center

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Sunday, Aug. 2, 2009:](#)

Politicians don't care about us

California is the third-largest state in the nation. It is the most populated state in the nation. California is, I believe, the eighth-largest economy in the world.

Our state-issued bonds are at junk bond status. Our economy is in the tank. You would think that the politicians would stop and think about this. No, all they can think of is their own agendas. They do not care one bit about the people that put them there. If they did, they would realize that the constant bickering they do is ruining our great state.

They cut help to the poor and the schools, and rob the cities and counties to pay for the mistakes they have done. Then they leave the Air Resources Board and other pet projects alone. Why? Because they fatten the politicians' pockets more than the school districts, the poor and elderly. I think it's time to throw out every one of them and start over.

Rodney Bradshaw
Ceres