

Florez may seek cut in Valley air district's budget Lawmaker targets possible ag burning ban exemptions.

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau

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SACRAMENTO -- Making good on a threat made last week, state Sen. Dean Florez on Monday asked a legislative committee to withhold some state money from the Valley air district if it allows exemptions to a farm burning ban.

"If the district acts to reduce air pollution from ag burning, it will continue to see all of the financial benefits the Legislature provides to air districts," he said in a letter outlining his proposal to a Senate budget subcommittee. "If it doesn't, it will no longer be able to count on the state to subsidize its activities."

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District gets about two-thirds of its \$150 million budget from the state.

Florez, D-Shafter, said he only wants to strip a portion of the money, although he did not say how much.

"I firmly believe his heart is in the right place and at the end of the day he won't punish the Valley by taking clean-air funding away," said district executive director Seyed Sadredin.

The Senate subcommittee met Monday but did not take action on the request. Florez said he hoped to get the proposal included in the 2010-11 state budget, which lawmakers are not likely to approve until this summer.

The Valley air district board last week approved exemptions for grape and citrus growers from the final phase of the burning ban scheduled to take effect June 1. District officials say that the amount of acreage burned each year has been reduced by 70% since the ban was made law in 2003.

Board members approved the exemptions to the final phase on an 8-2 vote, saying alternatives to burning are too costly at the moment.

As part of his proposal, Florez wants lawmakers to dedicate \$10 million in existing state funds to restart a program that helps pay for costs of moving waste to biomass plants.

The state Air Resources Board must approve the burn exemptions at a hearing scheduled for Thursday in San Diego.

In a report, the board's staff said it agreed with the Valley district's action, noting that the "remaining burning will not cause or substantially contribute to violations of federal air quality standards."

Florez is lobbying the state board to delay action until he holds his own hearing on the issue next week.

Bike-to-Work Day promotes healthy commuting alternative to automobiles

By Jonah Owen Lamb, staff writer

Merced Sun-Star, Tuesday, May 25, 2010

Every morning for the past seven years Bob Smith, 56, has hopped on his bicycle just after 7 a.m. and pedaled to his work.

"I was getting too fat," he said. "I wanted to get in better shape and needed a hobby that was more of a healthy hobby."

At first he rode the nine miles to his county job in Merced from his home in the McSwain area. Then, when his office moved to Castle Commerce Center, that ride was cut down by two-thirds. Now his commute takes about a half-hour. He's usually the only bicyclist on the road. "I don't see too many commuters," he said.

Brianna Lara, 4, and her sister Dariana, 11, get rewarded with T-shirts and snack-filled backpacks for riding their bicycles Friday, National Bike to Work Day, by UC Merced students representing RAD and the Merced Bike Coalition.

The first local promotion of Bike-to-Work Day was Friday.

To promote the event locally, the Merced Bicycle Coalition set up several recharge stations around the county for people on their way to and from work as a way to promote a healthy alternative to automobiles.

"We want to make bicycling a safe and normal means for everyday transportation," said Lisa Kayser-Grant, the Bicycle Coalition's chairwoman and a member of the city's bicycle advisory committee.

"Our idea is to entice them (people) onto their bicycles to discover how easy it is to get around on your bike."

A combination of factors -- including unhealthy lifestyles, high gas prices and an increased awareness of the automobile's impact on the environment -- may be encouraging more people to bicycle, noted the Merced County Association of Government's website.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of people riding bicycles to work rose by roughly 20,000 from 1990 to 2000. Cities like San Francisco, Portland, Ore. and New York saw higher increases in recent years. For example, San Francisco's bicycle ridership jumped by 15 percent from 2006 to 2007, according to the League of American Bicyclists.

According to MCAG, 22 percent of all car trips are less than a mile. Fifty percent of the working population commutes five miles or less. If the average person biked to work or went shopping just once every two weeks, the pollution from 1 billion gallons of gasoline wouldn't rise into the atmosphere.

The city of Merced, while no match when compared to other cities, has an estimated 1.5 percent of population who ride their bikes to work each day, said Kim Nutt, with the city's planning department.

To help increase that number, the city's updated 2008 bicycle plan set a number of goals the city would like to achieve to increase bicycling, said Nutt. They included painting bike lane stripes on all roads in the city that are wide enough. Also, the city hopes to make a safe crossing at McKee Road and Black Rascal Creek. The goals also include exploring the possibility of creating a bike boulevard from Bear Creek to Main Street. Those are just a few of the future and ongoing plans for an increased bike infrastructure in the city of Merced, said Nutt.

Kayser-Grant said the city of Merced is doing a fairly good job at creating an infrastructure for bicyclists. But, she said, there's always room for improvement.

So Smith's daily ride to Castle Commerce Center will probably be a solitary affair for some time to come.

Walmart in Galt could be delayed

Residents file lawsuit challenging environmental impact report

By Maggie Creamer, News-Sentinel Staff Writer
Lodi News Sentinel, Tuesday, May 25, 2010

A group of residents who live near the proposed Walmart in Galt near Twin Cities Road and Fermoy Way have filed a lawsuit against the project.

The Galt Citizens for Sensible Planning filed the suit on May 17 in Sacramento Superior Court.

City Manager Jason Behrmann said the court process will delay the Walmart for at least 9 months. The store could be delayed further if the court rules that the city has to redo any part of the environmental analysis.

And even if the judge throws out the challenges, there could be a delay if the group appeals the decision, Behrmann said.

The lawsuit lists 108 reasons they believe the environmental impact report the city prepared does not meet the California Environmental Quality Act. The state law mandates that cities and counties study the effect any new development will have on the surrounding environment.

The residents argue the report did not meet state standards because the analysis of traffic included flawed data, it did not consider the aesthetic of constructing 12 foot walls around the project, and there was not a detailed enough study on storm water.

The lawsuit also states that the report includes flawed data on how the project will affect air quality, noise and lighting.

Walmart spokeswoman Angie Stoner said she could not speak specifically about the lawsuit, but the retailer believes the Galt City Council approved an adequate environmental impact report.

"It's a great disappointment that this lawsuit could cause a delay in putting 300 people to work and getting sales tax for the city. We continue to hear from Galt residents even after the approval that they are desperate for jobs and convenience a local Walmart could provide," Stoner said.

The city has an indemnification agreement with Walmart, so the retailer will be responsible for any legal expenses, Behrmann said. He said the city will hire outside counsel to work on the case.

All the concerns listed in the lawsuit have been brought up at public meetings or in their written comments on the analysis.

"We feel like all the concerns have been addressed and mitigated, but they obviously disagree," he said.

The case has been assigned to Superior Court Judge Tim Frawley, but there is no court date scheduled.

In March, Frawley ruled on a case involving a retail center with a Walmart in Rocklin. Loomis and Rocklin Residents for Responsible Growth put in a variety of challenges on the city's environmental analysis, according to a story in the Sacramento Business Journal.

He dismissed all the challenges with the exception of one. He said the city needed to redo its traffic study because it was confusing and conflicted with the economic impact/urban decay report.