

Merced looks to build a green path to the future

By Ameera Butt

Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2010

The Merced City Council agreed to take steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through the adoption of a climate action plan Tuesday.

The city's Planning Department prepared the community-based plan, a document that would "set achievable greenhouse gas reduction targets for the community," according to Bill King, principal planner for the city.

"It does this by establishing objectives, strategies and actions to reduce greenhouse gases," he said.

The plan would benefit the city -- already riddled by high air pollution levels -- by providing environmental sustainability in the form of strategies and actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

For example, King said one action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions could be how the city designs communities in respect of land use location, design of street sidewalks and bike lanes "so people have realistic options of moving relatively short distances without the need of a vehicle."

In doing this, he said there are also other benefits such as reducing the flow of trash sent to the landfill through recycling efforts. He said another benefit of the future plan would be water conservation and being able to utilize water long-term.

Lastly, he said the City Council would select the greenhouse gas emission target. He said a greenhouse gas emission target identifies how much of a reduction of greenhouse gases the city wants to achieve.

Merced will most likely set its target by the beginning of next year, according to Councilwoman Mary-Michal Rawling.

"Merced is within the San Joaquin Valley air basin, which is an extreme nonattainment," said Rawling, who is also program manager at the Merced/Mariposa County Asthma Coalition.

A nonattainment area is an area of the country where air pollution levels persistently exceed the national ambient air quality standards, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

"There are various levels of nonattainment that you can be titled with. Extreme is the worst," she said. "The cities in the Valley usually duke it out with the cities down south on the worst air in the nation on an annual basis."

Rawling added there hasn't been much improvement in Merced in the past five years.

"As a result, people have allergies and asthma," she said. "One in five kids have asthma in Merced."

King said the plan would also allow staff to solicit input from the community in the form of a short-term, temporary advisory committee. King said he will go back to the City Council in early December to have them confirm members of the committee. Currently, he said there is no posting for committee membership on the city's website. The City Council accepted grant funds from the federal Department of Energy in November last year to undertake projects to increase energy efficiency, according to the report. One of the projects was the drafting of the climate action plan.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wed., Sept. 8, 2010:](#)

Bad air at Bulldogs Stadium

We attended the Fresno State/Cincinnati football game on Saturday night. It was a big win for Fresno State and a fantastic re-emergence of the defense.

However, when walking up the side ramps to enter the stadium, and again walking down when leaving, fans are exposed to the awful almost unbearable exhaust from the gas-powered people movers.

Can't Fresno State get a little green and use electric carts near all these fans. Isn't the air bad enough without having to breathe the awful exhaust from these dreadful gas-powered machines. Please give us a break.

Bill Casarez, Fresno

[Turlock Journal Editorial, Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2010](#)

All aboard!

By Kristina Hacker, Editor

As a Midwest transplant, one thing I have found to be true with most Californians is their love of travel. Many of my neighbors and co-workers spend their weekends sightseeing, attending festivals and enjoying the great outdoors all around the state.

Growing up in Indiana, a one-hour trip was a big deal. In California, people drive an hour to go to lunch on a weekday. It's not even considered a "trip" in California unless you're driving for at least four hours.

This love of travel that goes hand-in-hand with a more regional outlook is what makes California an ideal place for high-speed rail.

Over the past couple of years the California high-speed rail project has slowly progressed from the idea of a greener and faster way to travel, to an actual plan.

The 220 mile-per-hour, 800-mile rail system will stretch from San Francisco to San Diego, and is set to begin construction in 2012. The system is expected to be rideable by 2017, though the Merced to Sacramento branch and Modesto station are scheduled for a later phase of construction.

A trip between San Francisco and Los Angeles would likely cost less than an airline ticket or car travel while being more environmentally friendly. A trip from Modesto to Los Angeles would take about two hours, at a cost of approximately \$46, according to California High-Speed Rail Authority projections.

Sounds great, right? Of course, like any good idea the devil is in the details. First, there is the cost to consider. It is hard for anyone to image spending billions on a project while the state budget is in a mess. So far, however, Californians have shown foresight and a commitment to environmentally friendly travel.

In 2008 California voters approved a \$9.95 billion state bond measure for the rail system. The CHSRA is also taking advantage of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding. In January, the CHSRA won \$2.25 billion in federal stimulus funds and it continues to seek further federal funding. The total project is expected to cost \$42 billion.

While the authority continues to gather funding, debate has been underway on placement of the tracks.

Last week the Palo Alto City Council passed a "no confidence" resolution against the high-speed rail project, according to the San Jose Mercury News. Bay Area cities Menlo Park and Atherton have already publicly and legally voiced their opposition to the new rail system, citing fears of socially dividing their communities based on which side of the tracks they live. Increased sound pollution and falling property values were also concerns voiced by Bay Area residents.

Despite the Bay Area controversy, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and President Barack Obama have publicly supported the project. In July, the CHSRA released polling results which saw 34 percent of those polled wanting to see the project move forward "as quickly as possible," 42 percent said they would like to see the network built, despite concerns over the estimated \$42 billion final cost, and 13 percent opposed the project.

I believe this project would be a boon to California in many aspects.

The Central Valley is neck and neck with the Los Angeles area every year for having the worst air quality in the country. It is about time we make public transportation a viable option in California for everyone. Taking six hours on a bus to get somewhere that is 200 miles away is not a viable transportation alternative to driving for a business person. However, making the same trip in two hours is quite the incentive to leave the Hummer at home and go green.

When people start using high-speed rail for business travel, it won't be long before leisure follows. Southern California will become a day trip possibility for those of us in the Central Valley. Instead of going to the movies — for the fifth time in one month — Turlockers will have the option of spending the day at Venice Beach or Disneyland and still make it home in time for a decent night's sleep.

And those Southern California residents who want to get up close with America's farmland can visit our Valley farmers markets and agricultural festivals.

Once people get the hang of fast intra-state travel, any local business can become a regional must-shop. The downtown bridal destination campaign would have the opportunity to draw brides and grooms to be from over 500 miles away. A two-hour trip one way is nothing when a bride is looking for that perfect dress.

High-speed rail will change the way Californians do business, vacation and shop. This is a project we should all support. I look forward to the day when California — and hopefully the rest of the nation — can travel the way they do in Europe, Japan and China.

Our state is full of opportunity and adventure. It's about time we were able to enjoy it.