

Learning by doing

By Seth Nidever

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Tuesday's meeting of the Kings County Board of Supervisors was jam-packed, but it wasn't angry county residents arguing over a controversial issue.

It was a bunch of eighth-graders attending as part of an annual event organized by the county and Hanford Optimist Club to give students firsthand exposure to local democracy.

Each student was assigned to someone in county government, either an elected supervisor or a staff member in one of several departments, including fire, planning, public health and economic development.

The students assigned to supervisors sat in front of the large audience, learning parliamentary procedure as they helped conduct the meeting.

Sitting in Supervisor Tony Oliveira's chair - the supervisor was absent - was student John Reed from Kit Carson Elementary School. He was coached by Supervisor Tony Barba. In a white shirt and black vest, Reed leaned back in his padded chair, looking and acting the role of supervisor as he got a small taste of power and authority.

"I got new political knowledge and a very good understanding of politics in Kings County," he said. "I feel I've gained some experience."

Reed listened as Barba -- who is also on the board of directors of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District -- described a new rule passed last week approving an additional \$12 vehicle registration fee for Valley drivers. The fees will be used to pay federal fines assessed because of the Valley's dirty air, which is out of compliance with federal standards and remains a problem for people with respiratory diseases, asthma or bronchitis.

Reed, who has asthma, was particularly interested.

"That really struck me a bit. I think it might be a good idea," he said.

Reed added that his family is politically conservative, so he said he isn't sure about the merit of requiring drivers to pay the extra fee. He suggested there might be another way to pay for it.

"I feel for the taxpayers, because they've gone through a lot," he said.

Winter Knauer, another Kit Carson student, was also interested. She said she has breathing problems in the winter. Knauer said she's thinking about becoming a reporter, a lawyer or a marine biologist.

California farmers get \$24M for diesel machines

By Robert Rodriguez

Sacramento Bee and Modesto Bee, Thursday, Oct. 28, 2010

FRESNO — California farmers and ranchers will get \$24 million in 2011 to replace aging diesel machines as part of an ongoing effort to improve air quality, federal officials said Monday.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture program splits in half the cost of buying new, cleaner-running farm engines and equipment.

In the past two years, the program has replaced 814 old tractors and other farm equipment, and reduced emissions of nitrogen oxide — a key component of smog — by 1,349 tons.

That amount is equivalent to removing 408,000 cars from California highways, said Ed Burton, state conservationist for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Demand for the program has overwhelmed available funding over the past two years. During that time, the NRCS received more than 5,000 applications to replace diesel engines but was able to fund only 814, at a cost of \$43.4 million.

"The fact that landowners were stacked up seven deep for available funding indicates the strong ethic to improve air quality in California," Burton said.

Dairy farmers Dan Souza and his sister, Sandra Tavares — operators of Souza Dairy in Fresno County — used the federal program to replace two older front-end loaders with one newer model. The family saved \$63,000.

"The new machine does the work of two machines, and it runs much more efficiently," Tavares said.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials see this as helping to reduce smog significantly.

"We are well on our way to having one of the cleanest fleets of farm vehicles in farming," said Rick McVaigh, deputy air pollution control officer.

U.S. Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno said he and other valley elected officials will keep pushing for funding the program that was part of the 2008 Farm Bill.

The program aims to help farmers and ranchers achieve air-quality conditions set by the National Ambient Air Quality Standards.

Producers in 36 California counties that are not in compliance with one or more of these standards are eligible for the program.