

Kings County's vanpool program expanding

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2010

Whether you work as a correctional officer in Avenal, a federal worker in Fresno or a teacher in Corcoran, you can now easily take advantage of a public vanpool for your commute.

The gas and maintenance are paid for. And if you're a government employee, subsidies may even kick in. As a result, you'd spend less than \$60 a month to get to and from work.

But that wasn't the case eight years ago. An innovative regional program can be credited for helping hundreds of Kings County commuters save money and cut tailpipe emissions.

Now Kings County's regional transportation agency wants to take the program statewide.

Preparations to establish the new California Vanpool Authority entered their final phase this month as public entities began the process of updating the cooperative agreement that would allow the Kings County Association of Governments to join the authority.

"Everybody except (KCAG) has got it signed off, so we're going to have all the agencies sign the joint powers agreement in January or February," said Ron Hughes, executive director of the Kings County Area Public Transit Agency (KCAPTA). "We'll record the document with the Secretary of State, thereby creating the entity. We'll then spend the next four months doing all the structural building that takes place in the organization."

Hughes, whose agency runs the booming vanpool operation in addition to the local bus and dial-a-ride systems, is expected to take the helm of the new authority once created. Twenty members of his staff will transfer their duties to the new agency.

The new authority is scheduled to begin running the show on July 1, 2011.

Envisioned to help farmworkers and correctional officers, the vanpool program had humble beginnings.

Originally rolled out in 2002 with a few vans transporting correctional officers from Visalia to Corcoran, the program has since flourished. Today it boasts 30 employees and a fleet of more than 400 vans, including 170 vans designated for farmworkers, generally traveling through the five-county area from Madera to Kern. Vans operate in Ventura as well as Monterey.

In the absence of time-efficient public transportation services in the Valley, the program fills an important niche and provides a way to take a bite out of commuters' gas bills and reduce air pollution at the same time.

The program is currently run by an entity that only represents the four Kings County cities, including Hanford, and commuters living elsewhere and making use of the program have no say.

Creating a more widely represented agency would not only change that, but also ensure the program's long-term viability, Hughes said.

"A regional (program) has to have a regional platform for the benefit of the people who use it and for the benefit of the organizations in which it operates," Hughes said. "Now you'll have a voice for a rider, say, in Madera, because there will be a place where a Madera resident can go and complain about the service he is getting to somebody who represents the area."

Regionalization is also beneficial for the organization's survival, Hughes said.

"Even if one agency leaves the organization, it will still exist," Hughes said. "It will not collapse."

In addition to Madera, Tulare and Fresno counties, Monterey, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz are among the areas that are pledging to join the California Vanpool Authority.

The program is riding on its momentum. That program is large enough today that it is achieving economies of scale, allowing the cost for the riders to go down each year.

The vanpool program operation is an unsubsidized, self-sufficient operation. It generates about \$600,000 in revenue each year, and that money is used to expand the program even more and thus make it cheaper for all riders, Hughes said.

New life possible for bio-energy plant

By John Holland

Modesto Bee and Sacramento Bee, Wednesday, December 15, 2010

The tax-cut legislation pending in Congress could give new life to a proposal to turn orchard wood into electricity for the Modesto Irrigation District.

A bill the U.S. Senate considered Tuesday includes a one-year extension of the Dec. 31 deadline for a program that could cover 30 percent of the proposed plant's \$80 million-plus cost.

The MID board in October rejected the Beard Industrial District plant after hearing from critics concerned about air emissions and the cost of renewable power.

Partners in Valley Bio-Energy, which planned to build the plant, said after the vote that the project likely was dead, since the federal grant required that construction start by year's end.

Partner Stephen Endsley said Tuesday that the project could be revived if the federal support is extended. That would require getting the MID board to reconsider its decision, or finding another utility to buy some or all of the power.

Also Tuesday, the MID board unanimously and without comment rejected Valley Bio-Energy's claim that the project was turned down illegally. The claim is a precursor to a lawsuit that the partners could file against the district.

They contend that the board did not make the findings required under state law to reject the report on the project's environmental effects. They said the district violated an "enforceable oral contract" that required a good-faith effort to see the project through.

Tim O'Laughlin, general counsel for the district, said in October that it was bound only by a signed contract under which it had the exclusive right to negotiate with Valley Bio-Energy. That contract has ended.

The 30-megawatt plant would meet 9 percent of the MID's power demand and help move it close to a state mandate to get at least 33 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2020.

Supporters said the plant would have advanced emission controls and would be a relatively cheap source of renewable power. The plant would mainly burn nut and fruit trees removed from orchards, along with pruned limbs and clean wood waste from construction sites.