

Auto program passes with flying colors

Stockton Record, Wednesday, February 9, 2011

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and Valley Clean Air Now hosted the free Tune In and Tune Up Car Clean-Up Event on Jan. 22 at the Shima parking lot at San Joaquin Delta College.

Residents with 1995 model or older cars were provided free emissions tests. Those cars found to be repairable were signed up for a \$500 voucher for repairs at a certified Gold Shield smog shop. More than 400 cars were tested.

Students from Delta College assisted in the diagnostic procedures, providing them with hands-on automotive experience and interaction with the public.

Nonprofit organizations staffed 15 informational booths, and a free lunch was provided for the attendees.

The program is made possible by a grant from the Reformulated Gasoline Settlement Fund. Created as a result of an antitrust class action, the purpose of the fund is to achieve a clean air or fuel efficiency benefit for California consumers. Doug Wilhoit, president and CEO of the Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce, chairs Valley Clean Air Now.

Obama's \$53 billion high-speed rail pledge could fund huge chunk of California's project

By Mike Rosenberg

Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, Feb. 9, 2011

The White House on Tuesday announced plans to spend \$53 billion over the next six years to build high-speed railroads, bringing California's massive bullet train project closer to reality.

But congressional Republicans, who control the House and have vowed to slash spending, stand as a formidable opponent to the funding proposal outlined by Vice President Joe Biden. It's also unclear where most of the federal funds would come from.

But should the plan -- one of President Barack Obama's signature job-creation initiatives -- go through, California would be in line for the biggest chunk of funding. That money would fuel the state's \$43 billion bullet train project -- its biggest public works undertaking in a generation, and one that has been called both California's most promising and most wasteful endeavor.

Since California has the nation's largest and most advanced project, with construction to start next year in the Central Valley, the state has over the past few years received about 30 percent of federal bullet train grants.

If that formula holds, the state would get about \$16 billion from the U.S. government over the next six years under Obama's pledge. That amount is more than Caltrans, the California Highway Patrol and the Department of Motor Vehicles spend on their budgets and construction projects in a year -- combined.

Already armed with \$9 billion in state bonds and about \$3.6 billion from the federal government, the influx of the new federal grants could put California about two-thirds of the way toward funding the entire project. The state hopes to leverage the public funding to bankroll the rest of the project through the private sector and local governments, in time to start speeding bullet trains between the Bay Area and Southern California by 2020.

"This is the kind of bold investment in the future of our nation's infrastructure that will get the attention of the private sector and make high-speed travel a reality in the United States," Roelof van Ark, CEO of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, said in a statement.

And right on cue, the rail authority late Tuesday scheduled an announcement for Wednesday to discuss new "developments related to private-sector interest in California's high-speed rail project."

The money could be used to extend the first stage of construction -- a \$5.5 billion, 120-mile line between roughly Fresno and Bakersfield -- toward the Bay Area and Southern California. The tracks will run along the Caltrain corridor between San Francisco and San Jose.

The caveats, though, are plentiful.

Critics led by Republican members of Congress challenged the plans, especially in light of Obama's State of the Union address that called for freezing discretionary spending. And they said many train projects across the nation have proven to be money losers.

"This is like giving Bernie Madoff another chance at handling your investment portfolio," Rep. Joe Mica, R-Fla., the House Transportation Committee chairman, said in a statement.

Although Senate Democrats have generally supported funding high-speed rail, the Republican-led House could veto the plans if a compromise isn't reached.

Even if the funds come to California, state critics have spent the past two years arguing that the project will balloon well past its \$43 billion price tag. A Bay Area News Group analysis of comparable projects around the world showed that the project should actually cost \$38 billion to \$73 billion.

Californians Advocating Responsible Rail Design, a Palo Alto-based group, pored over thousands of pages of rail authority documents and determined last week that the actual projected price tag, based on estimates of each section of track, should be \$63 billion.

The rail authority has been viewed skeptically for relying on another \$10 billion from private investors and up to \$5 billion from local governments, even though it has no funding commitments from either sector.

White House officials said the first \$8 billion would come from the federal budget for the coming fiscal year, which Obama plans to unveil next week. But officials would not say where the rest of the money would come from. Most of its previous high-speed rail funds came from the stimulus package approved by Congress.

Global warming fix heats up hearing with EPA chief

By Dina Cappiello, the Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Wednesday, February 9, 2011

WASHINGTON -- The head of the Environmental Protection Agency is in for some grilling by Congress this year, so much so that a top House Republican joked that she should line up a permanent parking spot at the Capitol.

Topic A is the agency's attempt to curb the release of gases blamed for global warming. Having failed last year to enact new legislation to reduce greenhouse gases, the administration is left to use existing law to achieve its goals.

That, Republicans contend, will penalize industries that otherwise could be creating new jobs, and they've made the agency a central target of their anti-regulatory agenda.

On Wednesday, EPA chief Lisa Jackson goes before a House committee determined to block her agency's steps to address climate change. Jackson contends the law and compelling scientific evidence on global warming give her no choice but to act.

The agency has been caught before in shifting political winds. But in the 40 years since Republican President Richard Nixon created the federal agency charged with protecting the public from pollution, and Congress nearly unanimously passed laws that have cleaned up the air and water, longtime observers say the atmosphere for the agency has never been more toxic than it is now.

"It's really been quite extreme," said William Ruckelshaus, who was the first EPA administrator under Nixon and later ran the agency under President Ronald Reagan, of the rhetoric being aimed at the agency this time around. "What are they supposed to do? Sit there and do nothing?"

The latest and perhaps most draconian attack came from former House speaker and possible 2012 GOP presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, who called for abolishing the EPA and replacing it with an organization more friendly to business.

That followed Democrat Sen. Joe Manchin's use of a rifle to blast a hole through legislation limiting the gases blamed for global warming in a campaign commercial. The stunt helped him win West Virginia's open Senate seat.

Mike McKenna, a Republican strategist, says Gingrich and Manchin are outliers in a more reasoned debate over how big the global warming problem is and the different approaches for dealing with it.

"I don't think the (political) base is ready to throw EPA out the window," McKenna said. "There are plenty of people across the country who want EPA ratcheted down and think it has gone too far, too fast."

Lawmakers of both parties have already introduced a dozen bills aimed at weakening, delaying or blocking pollution regulations. Business groups invited by congressional Republicans to describe their biggest regulatory burdens singled out EPA rules more than any others.

The main target is the agency's use of the Clean Air Act to control emissions of greenhouse gases, a law that the Supreme Court said in 2007 could be used to fight global warming.

In 2009, the EPA under President Barack Obama put the law in motion when it concluded climate changes being caused by pollution from industries, automobiles and other sources burning fossil fuels are a threat to public health and welfare. Some Republicans - and some Democrats from industrial states - aren't convinced that's the case.

There's also growing resistance to a host of other regulations expected from the agency. Some were initiated by Obama, but others are the result of courts throwing out Bush-era regulations. Still others stem from reviews required by law to update standards to reflect the latest science. They cover everything from ground-level ozone, the main ingredient in smog, to coal ash disposal, to a rule aimed at reducing pollution blowing into downwind states.

"There has been an onslaught of job-crushing regulations emerging from the EPA over the last few years," said Sen. John Barras so, R-Wyo., at a recent hearing of the Senate Environment Committee. It was Jackson's first trip to Capitol Hill since Republicans took over the House and gained more seats in the Senate.

The EPA's defenders say the agency is simply following statutes aimed at protecting people's health - something they say has strong support and is necessary for a healthy economy.

"Simply put, you can't work if you can't breathe," Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., has said.

Trying to stop the train

Farm bureau considers new strategy to combat rail alignment

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Tuesday, Feb. 8, 2011

On an aerial photography map, it's a giant curved line slicing through prime northeastern Kings County farmland, a rich patchwork of green fields, orchards and vines.

It's the proposed alignment for California's yet-to-be-built high-speed rail network, a visionary 800-mile system that promoters pitch as a cure for everything from congested roadways to [air pollution](#).

To the Kings County Farm Bureau, it's an economic train wreck waiting to happen. So much so, the organization is proposing a new strategy to combat it, and they are asking local authorities to participate.

It's called "coordination." It basically means that California High-Speed Rail Authority officials would be forced to sit down with Kings County staff and Hanford city staff at the negotiating table to reconcile high-speed rail plans with local priorities. The process is triggered when local government agencies agree to participate in the process as equal partners.

Both Hanford and the county have passed resolutions supporting the Kings County Farm Bureau's position that high-speed trains should go along Interstate 5 or Highway 99, so it's pretty clear that county officials are opposed to the current alignment.

What isn't clear is how county officials will react to the coordination concept, a process that likely involves more commitment than passing a resolution. There may also be conflicts within the county, as some local leaders believe that high-speed rail, and a high-speed rail station in the area, could benefit the county economically.

Farm bureau officials are inviting county staff, county supervisors and Hanford officials to attend a workshop on the concept on Feb. 15 hosted by American Stewards of Liberty, a Texas-based property rights advocacy group.

In a related strategy, the Kings County Farm Bureau is forming an organization with other San Joaquin Valley farm bureaus to develop a concerted strategy to stop the current alignment, said Diana Peck, Kings County Farm Bureau executive director.

"The Kings County alignment is a disaster for us," Peck said.

The only problem is, it isn't a disaster for the state's High-Speed Rail Authority. In fact, officials there have already ruled out alignments along Interstate 5 and Highway 99. The authority decided that for Central Valley towns and cities to benefit, the line needed to pass close to or through populated areas. That eliminates the Interstate 5 corridor. An alignment along Highway 99 might work, but Union Pacific Railroad officials, who control the right of way, want nothing to do with the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

The farm bureau thinks that coordination might force rail officials to reconsider the impact on agriculture and county policies that protect the agricultural economy. Peck said she isn't convinced that the current alignment is a foregone conclusion.

In the end, however, legal action might be pursued against the authority, Peck said.

Meanwhile, she's determined to try out the unknown process of coordination.

"There are a lot of issues on the table right now," Peck said.