

Pumped up to participate in carpooling

By John Cox, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Monday, March 28, 2011

Timing may be on the side of local officials trying to nudge more commuters into carpools, vanpools and other alternative means of getting to and from work.

The latest thinking is that of all the proverbial carrots out there -- including subsidized rides and workplace-based programs -- none have as much potential as a certain stick that looms large these days: the steep run-up in fuel costs.

No doubt the high price of gasoline (the AAA said unleaded averaged \$4.008 a gallon in Bakersfield Friday, up 9 percent from a month before) is beyond the control of the rideshare specialists at the Valley Air District and the Kern Council of Governments. But given the enormity of the task, they'll take it.

"You really have to make a commitment, and that's hard for people," said Susanne Campbell, Kern COG's rideshare coordinator.

"With gas prices, I think more people are willing to change their behavior," she said.

Lest this fuel cynical thinking that people only respond to what hurts them in the pocketbook, Brenda Turner, Valley Air District's outreach and communications representative, said she's hearing that many also want to do something about the valley's poor air quality, if only because someone in their family suffers from pollution-sensitive conditions like asthma.

Tentative progress

Either way, signs of progress have been modest -- so far.

"We are starting to get a few more requests" for rideshare information lately, she said.

Karen King, CEO of the local bus system, Golden Empire Transit District, said a recent uptick in ridership over the last month probably is not directly attributable to surging gas prices.

"We really aren't seeing anything yet," she said.

But a shift may be around the corner. King cited a new report from the American Public Transportation Association saying that, based on a study of the gasoline crisis of 2008, more commuters will probably start taking the bus if gas prices hit \$4 a gallon.

"The \$4 mark does seem to be kind of the magic number," she said.

U.S. Census Bureau data show that between 2005 and 2009, the share of Kern County workers age 16 years or older who carpooled increased from 15.8 percent to 17.2 percent.

At Wednesday's Kern County Economic Summit, Cal State Bakersfield economist Abbas Grammy provided an analysis of federal, state and local data that suggests Kern commuter habits stand out in ways positive and not so positive. On one hand, Grammy said, a larger percentage of county residents carpool to work than do commuters living elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley, California and the nation. But at the same time, a larger share of people in Kern drive alone to work than do residents of those other areas, he said.

Adding incentives

If more commuters decide to share their ride to work, new and expanding government programs will be there to help.

This month the Kings County Area Public Transit Agency announced the expansion of its vanpool program in Kern County.

Available to people who now drive themselves at least 30 miles a day to work, the 10-year-old Kings Area Rural Transit vanpool program, or KART, provides and maintains vans that seat seven to 15 people. Drivers get a special fuel card for purchasing gas. The vans come with a two-way radio, a locator system and a \$10 million insurance policy. The program costs riders as little

as \$10 a month. One-time rebates of \$4,200 are available to new vanpool users from the San Joaquin Air Board.

Some local businesses will soon be expected to get on board with a mandatory program being put into effect by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The program, called eTRIP, or Employer Based Trip Reduction, requires that companies with 100 or more employees set up various ways for workers to learn about and take advantage of rideshare opportunities, public transportation and even bicycling to work. The idea is to promote cleaner air in the valley by reducing the number of vehicles on the road.

Available to smaller businesses but not mandatory for them, the program threatens penalties for companies that do not participate, even as it does not levy fees on employers whose workers do not ultimately show progress in changing their commuting habits.

Some companies have taken the initiative to encourage ridesharing without prodding by the government.

For example, Bakersfield's Aera Energy LLC subsidizes various options that allow employees to ride together to field locations around Kern County. Company spokeswoman Susan Hersberger said these include leased vans and a small number of company-owned vehicles.

At present, she said, about 125 of the company's production operating employees participate in the initiatives.

Rideshare assistance

These organizations provide incentives and other resources to workers looking to cut down on their commuting expenses:

Valley Air District

valleyair.org

healthyairliving.com

Kern Council of Governments

commutekern.org

Kings County Area Public Transit Agency

866-655-5444

Closing arguments set in Merck contamination case

The Associated Press

In the Modesto Bee, Monday, March 28, 2011

FRESNO, Calif. -- Closing arguments are set for Tuesday morning in a trial involving a former subsidiary of the pharmaceutical giant Merck accused of polluting groundwater, air and soil in a Merced subdivision for years.

About 2,000 residents of the subdivision claim the now-shuttered plant leaked hexavalent chromium, the cancer-causing chemical made famous in the movie "Erin Brockovich."

The plant used the chemicals to pressure-treat wood from 1969 to 1991.

Merck officials acknowledge that chromium contamination occurred, but deny that any of it left the confines of the plant.

The trial is just the first phase. If jurors decide that the contamination did leak out, a second jury will be convened to decide whether residents were harmed by exposure to the chemical.

Court OKs air-pollution restrictions for ships

By Bob Egelko, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, March 29, 2011

A federal appeals court rejected a shipping industry challenge Monday to California's offshore air pollution rules requiring vessels to use low-sulfur fuel within 24 miles of the coast, standards that the court said would save about 3,500 lives over six years while modestly increasing shipping costs.

The ruling by the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco is a milestone in California's efforts to curb a significant source of hazardous emissions.

Low-grade bunker fuel from ships has a sulfur content more than 1,600 times as high as diesel fuel for trucks and exposes 80 percent of the state's population to pollutants linked to cancer, respiratory ailments and heart disease, the court said.

The state Air Resources Board adopted the restrictions in July 2009 for ships that cross the 24-mile threshold while bound for California ports. The board estimated that its rules would reduce sulfur oxide emissions by 90 percent and prevent nearly 100,000 cases of asthma and 3,500 premature deaths by 2015.

The board estimated industry costs at \$30,000 for each vessel reaching port, or \$1.4 billion through the end of 2014. Broken down by cargo, the rules would add 12.5 cents to the cost of a plasma TV and one-seventh of a cent to a pair of athletic shoes, the court said.

The state regulations will be superseded in 2015 by similar restrictions imposed nationwide by the federal government, extending 200 miles offshore.

The Pacific Merchant Shipping Association successfully challenged an earlier version of the California regulations in 2008. The association argued in this case that federal law establishes state boundaries at 3 miles beyond the coast and prohibits air pollution regulations any farther offshore.

But the court said the air board is not trying to extend California's borders and instead is trying to regulate activity beyond those boundaries "because of the serious harmful effects of this conduct on the state and its residents."

The sulfur restrictions have their greatest impact in areas near the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach but will reduce harmful emissions in all coastal areas, said attorney Melissa Lin Perrella of the Natural Resources Defense Council, which joined the state in defense of the rules.

"This is one of the most important air pollution control regulations ever," she said.

The shipping association's president, John McLaurin, said his organization hasn't decided whether to appeal.

"We continue to believe that this is an issue that requires global and national solutions rather than a patchwork approach that could vary state by state," he said.