

Competition is in the air: Teams vie for prizes during Dare to Spare contest

By Eric Woomer

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Tulare County residents have been challenged to help clean the air by giving up their vehicles for one week this month

Teams like those created by Nathan Garza are ready for that challenge.

"It's a blast," said Garza, who works as a preservation technician in Visalia and participated last year. "It's a competition to see who can be the greenest team."

Teams are being organized throughout Tulare County in a competition that will name a winner by the end of the month. Teams, made up of three people, have until April 16 to register on the Dare to Spare website.

"We are encouraging people to find classmates, co-workers or friends to signup," said Gamaliel Anguiano, a city transit analyst. "We want to challenge them to make a difference in the fight to clean air."

The objective: Earn as many points as possible by doing things to help reduce air pollutants.

Participants can earn points for such things as:

- Riding a bike to work, school or shopping
- Carpooling
- Taking the bus
- Walking to lunch, work or meetings

During the week of April 18-22, teams will tally points on the website each time a team member does something to spare the air. At the end of the week, the team with the most points wins.

Besides bragging rights and community recognition, winners will get prizes from gift certificates to Downtown Visalia to T-shirts.

Each member will also receive a free Visalia Transit bus pass for that week.

This is the third year the city has conducted the challenge, which is open to all Tulare County residents.

"We find that once people get going they find it's not as bad as they thought to ride their bike or take the bus," Anguiano said. "We are hoping to get a lot of teams together and making this successful."

Riding high

The competition comes at a time when Visalia Transit is seeing its highest ridership numbers in history. In March, more than 160,000 riders stepped on and off Visalia buses — a 10.7 percent increase from the previous high.

And it seems as ridership increases, so do the number of calls coming in to the relatively new Green Line transit call center, which serves all Tulare County.

"We have people who don't even use the transit guide any more. They just call us," said Lori Hernandez, who has memorized all of the 600 stops in Visalia and many throughout the county. "We are accurate, and people know that."

Last month, 4,243 calls came in asking about routes and times for buses in Visalia, Tulare, Porterville and transit systems countywide.

While the increased ridership is being linked to soaring gas prices, the increase in calls is being linked to quick, accurate information, said Greenline's Jay Tee Carlos. Like Hernandez, Carlos has seen the call center grow from fewer than 1,000 calls a month in 2009 to last month's high.

Through GPS and geotagging bus stops, call-center representatives are able to give real-time updates to riders waiting for their bus in the hot sun or trying to make a matinée.

"Riders have come to rely on us to get to their doctor appointments," Hernandez said. "People need to know how far away the bus is and we can help."

How to get involved

April 16 is the deadline to enter Dare to Spare. Information: www.daretospare.com, 1-877-404-6473.

Tuolumne quarry approved despite criticism

Traffic congestion, pollution among cities' concerns

By Kevin Valine

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, April 6, 2011

SONORA — The Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors approved Tuesday an open-pit mine despite Riverbank and Oakdale's concerns over trains hauling the mined rock through their cities.

The Cooperstown Quarry could open in about a year on 135 acres bordering Stanislaus County, about nine miles south of Knights Ferry. Miners could remove as much as 56 million tons of crushed rock over 75 years.

Trains from Oakdale-based Sierra Northern Railway would haul the rock through Oakdale and Riverbank. The trains can have as many as 60 cars, which is about two-thirds of a mile long, and make as many as 20 round trips per week, according to Tuolumne County documents.

But Sierra Northern officials say they will make far fewer trips. Sierra Northern is owned by The Sierra Railroad Co.

Riverbank and Oakdale officials are concerned about the trains backing up traffic and delaying fire engines and ambulances responding to 911 calls, though the trains would have less impact on Oakdale.

An attorney representing Riverbank reiterated that city's opposition Tuesday in a letter delivered to Tuolumne County officials.

"I wish Tuolumne County the best in their endeavors. I hope they did it legally," said J.D. Hightower, Riverbank's Development Services director after the meeting. When asked whether the city would sue Tuolumne County, Hightower said, "We are considering all of our options right now."

Riverbank officials have called for an environmental impact report for the proposed mine, as have Stanislaus County Supervisor Bill O'Brien, who represents Riverbank and Oakdale, and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The air district said the project far exceeds the limits for nitrogen oxides, a key component of smog.

10 mph through cities

Tuolumne County officials said an environmental impact report is not required and they followed state environmental law in reviewing the project.

Tuolumne County Supervisor Randy Hanvelt said project opponents were using the lengthy and expensive process of an environmental impact report as a "weapon" to stop the mine.

The Cooperstown Quarry has widespread support in Tuolumne County, and Supervisor Evan Royce said the 45 well-paying jobs the mine would bring were desperately needed and would provide livelihoods for three generations of families.

The Tuolumne supervisors voted 5-0 to approve the project. The supervisors held more than a three-hour public hearing on the project March 15 and postponed making a decision until Tuesday's meeting.

The trains would travel at 10 mph through Riverbank and Oakdale. In Oakdale, the trains would cross Yosemite Avenue near ConAgra Foods. They would pass Oak Valley Hospital and The Vintage and Bridle Ridge subdivisions before crossing at Crane Road.

In Riverbank, the trains would follow Patterson Road through downtown, crossing at Claus Road near Riverbank High School and Eighth Street before crossing Patterson Road and turning into a switching yard. It would take about four minutes for a 60-car train traveling at 10 mph to clear a crossing.

Sierra Northern General Manager Larry Ingold said the trains will have less impact than feared by Riverbank. Based on the mine's production schedule, Ingold said, Sierra Northern would make two round trips per week during the first few years.

Trains better than trucks

Ingold said at peak production in 2043, Sierra Northern would make five round trips per week. He said the trains don't necessarily have to be 60 cars in length and could be smaller, depending on demand for the mine's product.

Ingold said that one train of 60 cars is the equivalent of 240 tractor-trailers, which would produce more pollution. The trains also keep the big rigs off congested roads.

Cooperstown Quarry would consist of an open-pit mine and processing plant on land owned by Jack and Tricia Gardella. Resource Exploration Drilling LLC would run the quarry. The mined rock would be used for roads, levees, railroad ballast and other industrial uses.

As one of the conditions of approving the project, Tuolumne County asked that Sierra Northern and Cooperstown Quarry officials meet regularly with Oakdale, Riverbank and other government agencies affected by the project, such as the Stanislaus Consolidated Fire Protection District.

The purpose of the meetings is to lessen the project's impacts. The first meeting was March 23 in Oakdale.