

TCAG announces new bike trail for west Visalia

By David Castellon

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A new bicycle trail is coming to Visalia.

The Tulare County Association of Governments is expected to add planning and construction of a 3/4-mile-long bike trail in west Visalia to its list of federally funded transportation projects in the county.

"We had a call for projects a while back, and this is one of the projects that was awarded," said TCAG Executive Director Ted Smalley.

TCAG and Visalia officials said the asphalt trail would be similar to one along Packwood Creek on the south end of the city. The new trail would run along the south bank of Mill Creek from North Akers Street going west to Marcin Court, a block east of North Shirk Road.

Originally, the estimated \$478,000 in combined costs to design, obtain rights of way and build the trail was to be paid for with money raised through the county's Measure R half-cent sales tax, approved by county voters in 2006.

The tax is used largely to raise money for transportation projects, including road improvements and building bike and pedestrian trails.

During their meeting Monday at the Porterville Public Library, members of TCAG's board of directors — made up of the five Tulare County supervisors and one representative from each of the county's eight cities — are expected to add the Visalia bike trail project to the county's list of Federal Transportation Improvement Projects.

That would allow TCAG to use federal Congestion Mitigation Air Quality dollars to pay \$422,000 toward developing and building the Visalia bike trail next year.

CMAQ money funds surface transportation projects that contribute to improved air quality and help relieve traffic congestion, according to the Federal Highway Administration website.

About \$4 million to \$5 million in CMAQ funding is awarded annually to Tulare County, Smalley said. "And what we do is every two years or so, we put out a call for projects," he said.

The bike path project is being added because some projects from the last fiscal year were completed for less than their budgeted costs, and an additional \$400,000 was awarded because Tulare County was one of the top counties to get its projects done on time.

"[That] freed up some money this year," he said.

Smalley said Measure R money will cover the remaining \$56,000 for the bike trail project, so the city of Visalia will not have to put up any of its own money.

"This section of trail parallels the Visalia Medical Clinic and is adjacent to various, nearby health offices, restaurants, ending at an existing trail in a residential neighborhood," which extends to Shirk, states Visalia's application for the CMAQ funding.

It goes on to say that the trail is part of Visalia's Waterways and Trail Plan, and a map provided by the city shows plans to extend the trail farther east, following Mill Creek at some points and diverting around some neighborhoods at others.

City officials didn't respond to calls to discuss in detail the city's plans for bike and pedestrian trails.

Using federal dollars to develop the 3/4-mile trail frees up the rest of the Measure R money originally earmarked for the project, Smalley said.

Other projects that the TCAG board is expected to add to the local Federal Transportation Improvement Projects include paving to shoulders on portions of West Sierra Way in Dinuba, at a cost of \$205,000; a \$125,000 project to expand the capacity of the city of Exeter's compressed natural gas-fueling station; and building a roundabout at the intersection of Valencia and Naranjo boulevards in Woodlake for \$1.39 million. A roundabout is a circular intersection not controlled by stop signs or traffic lights in which cars travel around a center island and then onto the connecting streets.

Smalley said the roundabout helps improve air quality because cars don't have to sit at the intersection waiting for the traffic signals to let them move.

Paving road shoulders also helps air quality as it reduces dust kicked up when cars drift off the pavement onto dirt shoulders, he said.

Smoke from 3,200-acre Sequoia fire to worsen air quality

By Juan Villa

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Tulare County air quality will be worsened by the 3,200-acre Lion Fire burning in the Sequoia National Forest, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials said.

Local air officials issued a health advisory for residents of the mountain communities of Johnsondale, Ponderosa and Camp Nelson. The Springville-Porterville area could be affected by conditions that could carry smoke toward the air basin.

"At this point, most of the smoke is moving east and south," district spokeswoman Jaime Holt said.

Residents are urged to take precautionary measures for their local air-quality conditions and health situations. The smoke contains particulate matter dangerous to human health.

Air effects from the smoke will vary depending on current weather conditions and how many acres continue to burn.

The air district is working closely with the U.S. Forest Service and the Kern Valley and Great Basin Unified air pollution control districts to monitor the fire on an hourly basis.

The fire, in the Golden Trout Wilderness Area of the forest, was ignited by lightning July 8 and could reach about 6,500 acres in size.

The fire has officially closed trails to the north and south of Lion Meadows. No other trails have been closed, but that could change as the fire grows.

Forest officials said fires are a natural ecological process in the Sierra Nevada that help shape the wilderness vegetation.

"Those aspects of fire that are unfavorable, such as smoke, can be outweighed by future benefits that can be obtained by using a fire such as the Lion Fire for ecological benefit," Western Divide District Ranger Priscilla Summers said.

Electric cars about to cost more in California

By Jerry Hirsch

Los Angeles Times, Thursday, July 21, 2011

It's going to cost more to buy electric cars in California.

The state has run out of the \$5,000 rebates it was giving people who purchased all-electric vehicles such as the Nissan Leaf and Tesla Roadster.

That's on top of a price increase for the Nissan Leaf. The automaker said this week that it would

raise the price of the base model when the 2012 cars come out this fall by \$2,420 to \$36,050, including destination charge. The higher-trim-level Leaf SL will go up \$3,530 to \$38,100, including destination charge.

But there could be some relief for those who were on the waiting list for the \$5,000 rebate. The state's Air Resources Board on Thursday will consider a recommendation to provide rebates of \$2,500 to about 500 people who have already purchased cars and who were on the waiting list.

The vote would provide additional funds for about 5,500 rebates — also \$2,500 — for electric cars and some other types of zero-emission vehicles such as the hydrogen vehicles that some automakers offer through experimental lease programs, said Mary Fricke, spokeswoman for the Air Resources Board.

None of this affects the \$7,500 federal tax credit used to spur sales of electric vehicles and plug-in hybrids, such as the Chevrolet Volt. The Volt doesn't qualify for the state rebate, though emission-control upgrades to the vehicles expected sometime next year could put it on the list.

The rebates are intended to promote the production and use of zero-emission vehicles, known as ZEVs, which include electric, plug-in hybrid electric and fuel-cell vehicles.

"The government is saying that if you are an early adopter, be prepared to pay for it," said Jesse Toprak, an analyst at auto information website TrueCar. He said there's enough demand for electric vehicles to absorb some price increases and shrinking rebates, at least for the next year or so.

It's not a surprise that the California rebates are shrinking, said Brian Wynne, president of the Electric Drive Transportation Assn.

"The California rebate already has been a particularly generous incentive," Wynne said.

Though incentives are helpful to increasing sales, the electric-car industry has to get to the point where its vehicles are competitive with traditional internal-combustion-engine cars, he said. That will require production in greater volume and price decreases for batteries and other components.

Nonfinancial incentives, such as carpool-lane permits for electric vehicles, can be just as important to increase sales as dollars from the government, especially in regions such as California that are known for traffic congestion, Wynne said.

The number of electric-car offerings is about to grow. Other automakers have battery-electric and plug-in offerings set to hit dealerships in the next 18 months, including the Mitsubishi iMiEV, the Ford Focus Electric, the Toyota Prius plug-in hybrid, the Toyota RAV4 electric, the Honda Fit EV and a plug-in hybrid version of the Honda Fit.

As for the Nissan Leaf, the automaker said it was making some changes as part of its price increase. It is adding cold-weather features such as a battery warmer, a heated steering wheel and heated front and back seats to both trim levels. The SL model also gets a fast-charging port that works with a 480-volt outlet to charge the car in 30 minutes, compared with eight hours using a 220-volt outlet. Previously, that was a \$700 option.

Nissan also is gearing up Leaf production. It is investing about \$1.7 billion — mostly from federal Department of Energy loans — in an electric-car battery factory and other upgrades at its massive factory complex in Smyrna, Tenn. It plans to start building the batteries and cars at the factory by the end of 2012.

On Wednesday, Nissan said it would produce the electric motor for the Leaf starting in early 2013 at its Decherd, Tenn., powertrain assembly plant. The factory will add about 90 jobs and will have

the capacity to produce up to 150,000 electric motors annually for the Leaf, which will be built in Smyrna.

Nissan has sold 4,134 of the battery-powered electric cars this year. [General Motors Co.](#)'s Chevrolet, by comparison, has sold 2,745 of its Volt car, which is technically a plug-in hybrid because it runs on electricity for about 40 miles before a gasoline-fueled generator kicks in to extend the vehicle's range. Chevrolet also is ramping up Volt production.