

Reedley planning unique multi-agency transportation hub

By Ben Keller, Business Journal

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Perhaps nowhere does government and education work so closely together as it does in Reedley, where an eager relationship between the city and local schools has birthed a one-of-a-kind facility that will serve as a transportation hub and clean technology center.

A compressed natural-gas fueling station is soon going in at the future site of the Central Valley Transportation Center, a joint project between the city of Reedley, Reedley College and the Kings Canyon Unified School District.

Sited on a 40-acre parcel at Dinuba and Buttonwillow avenues east of town, the facility is expected to store up to 110 buses and 35 fleet vehicles belonging to the school district while providing a base of operations for the city's Public Works Department and classrooms for instruction in vehicle maintenance and alternative fuels.

With more than 30 percent of its buses already converted to burn compressed natural gas (CNG), Kings Canyon Unified School District is leading the way on the center, planned with shops to store, wash and repair even more hybrid electric or alternative fuel vehicles that many feel the district's current fueling station on the campus of Reedley High School is not adequate to service.

"(Our fleet) can't really grow, so we need to move our facilities off this place, and our equipment for CNG is ancient," said Mark Garza, director of construction and modernization with the school district. "As well, we will be the first school district in the country to have a fully hybrid electric school bus by January."

The city, with only its four Dial-A-Ride service vans running off CNG and three CNG garbage trucks on the way, plans to rely on the district's example and expertise as it begins to replace its own gas-guzzling engines while also looking forward to its first accessible fueling station.

A \$480,000 California Energy Commission grant made to the city in August is funding a refill station at the site for the first \$6-million phase of the center that is essentially a fuel island with electric charging stations and dispensers for CNG, E85 ethanol fuel and other supporting equipment.

"Once we have fueling station in place that gives up flexibility to acquire CNG and electric vehicles," said Russ Robertson, public works manager with the city. "It's a combination of resources that we feel is very unique and very important to stretch our dollars."

With help from a grant of \$1.3 million from the Department of Labor, Reedley College's portion in the partnership will be new classes at the site when the Phase 2 education complex is built. According to David Clark, dean of instruction at Reedley College, this will be instrumental as the college expands its auto and diesel program with instruction in alternative fuels and green technology.

The college is also augmenting its manufacturing program with curriculum on renewable energy technology like solar, supported by a 1.2-megawatt solar array on the building's parking structures that is expected to meet the facility's entire power needs.

Clark added that there will also be classes available to incumbent workers, particularly for city staff, to train them how to work on hybrid buses and other alternative fuel vehicles.

"Not a lot of existing mechanics know how to work on that stuff," Clark said. "We're also teaching on fuels and retrofit filters. It's really centered around air quality."

While air quality and fuel efficiency are two critical objectives, the project, not far from the Reedley Sports Park, was really envisioned nearly eight years ago as a way for city and schools to consolidate and save money.

About five years later, the concept gathered steam, finally gaining approval from the city council earlier this year. So far, the partnership, communicating through regular meetings of its Joint Powers Authority, has secured \$2 million for the project, enough to begin the Phase 1 core facilities in the spring.

The actual timeline, however, depends on further funding. Recently applying for an \$8 million grant from the Department of Transportation, the group is now pursuing \$3 million from the Economic Development

Agency. The effort was also backed by a \$998,000 CMAQ (Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality) grant from the Federal Transit Administration.

"The entire project, all four phases, is \$45 million," Garza said. "It's a big wish list. Every year there are solicitations that go out."

Following an anticipated 5-year build-out, Garza said, the city and school district will be able to share meeting rooms, wash racks, service bays and other equipment at the center.

As well, the center, designed by Darden Architects of Fresno, has been drawn out to allow for future expansion, capable of serving other regional school districts and governmental agencies.

"This is one of a kind. I don't know of any others," Robertson said. "When we go to the state level to seek grant funding, we get a lot of good comments."

Congress spars over tightening boiler-pollution rules

Rob Hotakainen - McClatchy Newspapers

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WASHINGTON — Congress is feuding over how quickly the federal government should move in trying to reduce deadly air pollution that comes from industrial boilers and incinerators.

The issue has aroused much controversy in Washington state and elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, where the forest products industry is big business, fueled by the use of its byproducts to power biomass boilers, which run on plant material and animal waste.

Fears persist among many — Republicans and Democrats alike — that the federal government will go too far in hurting the region's economy by imposing new regulations that could result in mass layoffs.

The GOP-led House of Representatives voted nearly two weeks ago to force the Environmental Protection Agency to wait another 15 months before imposing new regulations on all types of boilers. The House plan would give companies five years to install equipment to capture more pollution, including mercury and lead.

Environmental groups oppose a delay. They say it could result in thousands of unnecessary deaths.

Across the nation, biomass boilers have become increasingly controversial as environmentalists question their safety and increased level of greenhouse gas emissions.

Last year, a study by the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit advocacy organization, urged that all state and federal subsidies for biomass be scrapped, saying the small amount of power generated by biomass plants isn't worth the risk to the environment.

Members of the Washington state delegation have been particularly active in the debate on Capitol Hill in recent weeks.

Calling the plan to delay the regulations "a no-cost jobs bill," freshman Republican Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler said that if Congress failed to act, pulp mills, paper mills and others that couldn't afford to upgrade their boilers "will all shed ... thousands of jobs" in her district in southwest Washington state.

Reflecting the issue's sensitivity in the Northwest, Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon joined a bipartisan group in July in proposing to put the brakes on the EPA, saying its new rules would "stymie the burgeoning biomass energy industry and make it very difficult for existing lumber and wood products mills to operate."

Much is at stake for Washington state, one of the nation's largest producers of biomass power.

With millions of dollars in subsidies and federal grants, at least a dozen biomass plants in the state are producing power from wood byproducts from mills and waste from forests.

One of them, Simpson Tacoma Kraft Co., a forest products company in Tacoma, generates electricity by boiling water to burn sawdust, bark and wood shavings from pulp mills and sawmills, sending the high-pressure steam into a turbine. The company declined to comment on the legislation.

Despite the sympathy for the biomass companies, the effort to delay the EPA rules faces a stiff fight, with environmental groups leading the charge against the legislation.

At the Natural Resources Defense Council, John Walke, the group's clean air director, called the plan "the latest installment of the tea party's unraveling of the Clean Air Act." He said the plan that passed the House would "sacrifice tens of thousands of lives, pollute the air we breathe and expose our children, families and communities to toxic air pollutants."

In a report issued earlier this year, the Congressional Research Service said the EPA rules would affect more than 13,000 boilers around the nation, most of them — about 85 percent — fueled by natural gas.

The report said companies would incur capital costs of less than \$7,000 to upgrade a natural gas-powered boiler. It said costs would be higher for coal-fired and biomass-fired boilers, which might need to install fabric filters to control mercury and other contaminants. The report estimated that there are 420 biomass-fueled boilers in the country.

According to the EPA, implementing the new regulations, beginning in 2013, would prevent 1,900 to 4,800 premature deaths a year, along with 1,300 cases of chronic bronchitis, 3,000 nonfatal heart attacks and 33,000 cases of aggravated asthma, among other things.

The EPA also said the new regulations would reduce national emissions by 7 percent, including 15,000 pounds of mercury each year.

The issue has kept lobbyists busy this year, with groups such as the Council of Industrial Boiler Owners and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce spending to delay the EPA regulations.

The boiler owners reported spending \$20,000 this year, while the chamber's work on the issue was just part of its nearly \$30 million overall lobbying effort, according to federal lobbying reports. On the other side of the issue, the American Lung Association spent \$170,000 to lobby on boilers and other issues this year, while Environment America Inc. spent \$53,000 on its issues, which included boilers.

At the White House, President Barack Obama's top advisers are siding with environmental groups, urging a veto if Congress approves the delay.

In the Senate, California Democrat Barbara Boxer, who heads the Environment and Public Works Committee, is leading an effort to kill the plan when it comes up for a vote there.

Earlier this month, Boxer's committee issued a report that said delaying the EPA rules would "sacrifice the enormous public health and economic benefits of the new safeguards." The report said the new rules could prevent thousands of premature deaths, reduce hospital visits and asthma attacks and prevent hundreds of thousands of lost workdays.

