

Community bands together for healthy air, environment

Vida en el Valle, Tuesday, Sept. 12, 2011

FRESNO -- Olga Valle has lived near Jane Addams Elementary School for about 15 years, but it was only recently that she became aware of the air pollution in her central westside neighborhood.

The neighborhood is located near Highway 99, the railroad, and two distribution centers, and is heavily trafficked by diesel trucks.

"I didn't notice until the day that they shut down the street right in front of Addams and all those big trucks are detoured to my street, and then all of a sudden I heard all of these roaring sounds," Valle said during a workshop last Saturday afternoon at Elizabeth Terrómez Middle School.

"That wouldn't be happening in the northside or another neighborhood."

A two-year pilot project that links city officials with federal agencies could address Valle's concerns about the health and environmental health of her neighborhood.

The initiative -- called Strong Cities, Strong Communities -- aims to provide federal assistance to six cities, so they can reach their strategic growth and development goals, Jared Blumenfeld, regional EPA administrator, said Saturday after the program kick-off event at Terrómez.

Along with Fresno, Cleveland, Detroit, Memphis, New Orleans, and Chester, Penn., were also selected to participate in the program.

"This is really an effort to see how we can bring (to Fresno) as many technical and financial resources that already exist," Blumenfeld, resaid. "It is about how do we use what we have in a more focused and smarter way."

The initiative is an opportunity for the City of Fresno to gain support for the work that has already begun on preparing for high-speed rail and reinvigorating the downtown core and nearby neighborhoods, said Elliott Balch, the city's downtown revitalization manager.

"Our goals are to show the federal government the approach that we are taking and challenges we are having with federal programs, and how federal programs could support what we're doing," he said.

Last Saturday, representatives from non-profit federal, state and local agencies joined with community members and people from non-profit organizations to discuss the community's health, environmental, and development priorities, which could be addressed through the initiative.

During one session, Sarah Sharpe, environmental health director for Fresno Metro Ministries, said the city's future growth plans must ensure that some residents -- like Valle of the Addams community -- don't bear the brunt of the city's industry and pollution.

"In the future, if Fresno does not change the way we grow, and we just allow people who have enough money to keep moving away from anything, we are never going to see change," she said.

Valley lawmakers lobby for roads and rail

By Michael Doyle, McClatchy Washington bureau

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WASHINGTON – San Joaquin Valley officials from Stockton to Bakersfield are putting aside their competitive instincts this week to lobby Congress with one voice.

They've got their work cut out for them, no matter how unified their chorus.

The Valley officials want federal funds for roads and rail. They want money for ports. They want streamlined environmental rules. They want a lot, at the very time a bitterly divided Congress seems inclined to offer less.

"It's hard to ask for money, because they're slashing spending left and right," San Joaquin Mayor Amarpreet Dhaliwal acknowledged Wednesday, "but the Valley has special issues."

Dhaliwal joined some 20 other representatives as part of the annual "Valley Voice" lobbying trip to Washington, sponsored by the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council. For two days, the team of transportation managers, planners, mayors, city council members and county supervisors pushed a common agenda.

In particular, the Valley representatives rallied behind a multibillion dollar transportation authorization bill that would steer money toward highways and railroads. Although the bill covers every state, some of its dollars would come the Valley's way. Documents distributed by the Valley group identify high-priority highway projects totaling \$2.6 billion, many of them involving improvements to Highway 99. The proposed improvements range from work on four San Joaquin County interchanges to road widening in Tulare and Kern counties.

"We know that there's not a lot of money, but we can also have an impact on policy," Merced Mayor Bill Spriggs said. "Some of the things we're asking for don't cost money."

The Valley wish list includes, for instance, support for a bill by Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, to ease federal air quality standards.

The Valley representatives also want Congress to specify that regions with extremely bad air pollution will have priority in securing certain federal transportation funds.

"We're looking at the transportation bill, and trying to tie it to air quality," Spriggs said.

Lawmakers so far have been stymied in their efforts to craft a full transportation bill, though the House on Tuesday approved by voice vote a short-term extension until March 31, 2012. This latest in a series of extensions is supposed to give House and Senate negotiators more time to work out their differences.

Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer leads the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which gives the Californians a leg up in angling for a piece of the pie.

Earlier this year, individual Valley counties sent their own delegations to Capitol Hill under similar "one voice" banners. All of these common-ground delegations try to avoid divisive proposals.

This week's lobbying trip, for instance, is steadfastly steering clear of California's politically controversial high-speed rail project, whose initial route runs from Bakersfield to rural Madera County.

"Every day, it's more and more of a boondoggle," Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, said of the high-speed rail project.

Nunes was one of a number of House members to address the San Joaquin Valley group Wednesday, spending part of his time denouncing Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein. The Valley representatives listened politely, though without necessarily sharing the Republican's vehemence.

"We have to work with Sen. Feinstein," Spriggs noted later.

Washington-based lobbyist Len Simon, whose clients include the cities of Fresno and Hanford and the Council of Fresno County Governments, has coordinated some of these trips, including this week's.