

Modesto workshop to discuss owning electric cars

Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee, Thurs., July 5, 2012

MODESTO -- People intrigued by electric vehicles can learn more about them at a July 21 gathering in north Modesto.

The free event, "The Future is Electric: Plug In and Get There," will run from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the regional office of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, 4800 Enterprise Way, off Bangs Avenue.

Attendees can learn about incentives of up to \$13,000 per vehicle and programs offered by the Modesto Irrigation District and Pacific Gas & Electric Co.

A few owners of plug-in electric vehicles will talk about their experiences. Some of the 2012 models will be on display.

People who plan to attend should register in advance at www.energycenter.org/cvrp-events. Lunch will be provided.

The event is sponsored by the air district and the California Center for Sustainable Energy. More information is at (858) 244-1177.

Illegal boom busted

By Glenn Moore / Tracy Press

Tracy Press, Tues., July 3, 2012

Tracy police and fire department officials confiscated more than 100 pounds of illegal fireworks from the home at 1941 Hillview Drive on Monday, July 2, the biggest such seizure in at least a decade.

Police, who acted on an anonymous tip, went to the home at about 3 p.m. and discovered what they say are illegal fireworks in the garage. What they found surprised them, according to Tracy police Capt. Jeremy Watney.

"We had no idea of the magnitude (of fireworks) we walked into," Watney said.

Tracy Fire Department Division Chief David Bramell called it the biggest cache of illegal fireworks discovered in Tracy in at least the past 10 years.

The tip came from someone who had been approached about buying some of the fireworks, according to police.

Watney said the amount of fireworks indicated they were not for personal use; police believe the owner, who has not been identified, was trying to sell them.

Police were not sure where the owner obtained the fireworks, but the boxes were marked "Made in China."

Tracy Fire Department Division Chief David Bramell described what police found as "professional-grade fireworks" — similar to those seen in the city fireworks show.

"Things that explode or are aerial and leave the ground are illegal all the time," Bramell said.

The seized boxes contained mostly aerial fireworks, rockets and mortars. There were also firecrackers similar to M-80s, large firecrackers that explode with enough force to maim someone holding them.

The size of the cache prompted police to alert the fire department about the potential hazard when the fireworks were discovered. An engine company was called to the scene as police officers searched the boxes.

Watney said most illegal fireworks confiscated by local police are small items. The volume discovered on Hillview Drive made officials wonder who would take custody of the fireworks, or if the San Joaquin County Bomb Squad should handle it.

The fireworks were taken from the house by the fire department and are being kept at an undisclosed, secure location. Eventually, they will be turned over to the state fire marshal's office, which will handle disposal.

Bramell said the fire marshal's office will impose fees on the city for the disposal, and the city will likely try to recoup the cost from the owner.

The penalty for possessing, selling or discharging more than 100 pounds of dangerous fireworks is up to one year in jail and a fine of up to \$10,000, according to the marshal's office.

As of 3:30 p.m. Tuesday, no charges had been filed or citations issued to the owner of the fireworks, Watney said. But the case will be forwarded to the district attorney's office, he added.

While criminal penalties for illegal fireworks might be severe, Brammel said the potential danger is even worse.

"There are professional-grade fireworks being fired off by people who aren't professionals," Bramell said. "I think the potential is high for loss of property or personal injury with fireworks of that magnitude. Those fireworks can cause a roof fire; go over a home and hit a field, setting it on fire; tip over and becomes a projectile and could injure a bystander."

Even legal fireworks can be a danger if used improperly, Bramell said.

[And the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District reminded residents via a media release that even well-used legal fireworks can injure neighbors because of the fumes, chemicals and particles they discharge.](#)

["Celebrating our freedom also means recognizing that our actions directly impact the health of our communities," said air district Chief Communications Officer Jamie Holt, adding that the elderly, small children and those with respiratory conditions are at higher risk from the particulate matter released by fireworks.](#)

But local law enforcement officials are especially on the lookout for illegal fireworks in use in the lead-up to the July Fourth holiday.

The San Joaquin County Sheriff's Department has not seen an especially large number of illegal fireworks in the county so far. Deputy Dave Konecny said calls for illegal fireworks typically pick up as the Fourth of July gets closer.

All fireworks — including the so-called "safe and sane" type that can be used in Tracy — are illegal to possess and discharge in unincorporated areas of the county, including Mountain House.

Tracy residents have already listened to nightly explosions of illegal fireworks.

"Statistically, it doesn't look like it, but it appears there is an increase in the use of illegal and dangerous fireworks," Bramell said. "If the trend continues it can lead to property damage or injury."

The U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission estimates there will be 9,000 injuries nationwide from fireworks this year and that a community the size of Tracy will average three. Injuries are most often burns, bruises and lacerations to the hands and face, but more powerful illegal fireworks can cause the loss of fingers or hands or even death.

The Tracy fire and police departments will step up patrols Tuesday, July 3, and on the Fourth of July holiday.

"We want to have a strong, concerted effort to remove this danger from the community — we will confiscate anything illegal in nature," Bramell said.

Police ask those reporting illegal fireworks to call 911.

UC Merced team explores use of plasma with biomass

By Joshua Emerson Smith

Merced Sun-Star, Tues., July 3, 2012

MERCED -- What if the Central Valley could turn its agricultural waste into clean energy?

That's a process scientists at UC Merced are trying to perfect.

Under a \$258,000 grant from the California Energy Commission, university professors and students are working with a prototype of a "plasma gasification reactor," which can turn bio-mass waste into what they hope will be low-emission fuel.

"We're particularly interested in biomass because of the abundance of it," said Gerardo Diaz, assistant professor at UC Merced School of Engineering. "The amount of agricultural waste that is produced in the Central Valley is substantial."

While the idea of plasma gasification has been around for a while, the technology has recently shown promise as potentially affordable for commercial and public use.

Under the grant, scientists at UC Merced are focused on determining just how inexpensively and cleanly that energy can be produced.

"We have been looking at the type of gas that's formed based on the type of biomass that we're putting in," Diaz said. "We're going to be looking at the emissions that come out of combusting that gas."

The reactor uses a plasma torch at temperatures of more than 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit to heat waste and turn it into what is called "synthetic gas," a mixture of carbon monoxide and hydrogen. Charcoal is also a byproduct, which proponents of the technology say can be used in agricultural fertilizer.

That gas can then be used as fuel to run a turbine or to create biodiesel.

"When you take biomass and you burn it in an incinerator you generate a lot of hydrocarbons," said Wolfgang Rogge, associate professor at UC Merced School of Engineering.

"It goes out in smoke like a wood stove," he said. "Here the basic idea is that the fuel gets ripped apart in components like CO (carbon monoxide) and hydrogen, and you can use it as a fuel, and hydrogen is a clean fuel."

Foret Plasma Labs has loaned the university the plasma gasification equipment in recent years. The private company has pledged to let the university use the equipment for about another two years, at a total estimated value of about \$250,000.

The owner of the company, Todd Foret, said he plans to open a manufacturing plant in Merced in the next few months to build relatively small plasma gasification generators that run on biomass waste.

"Our target customers are small businesses located in the San Joaquin Central Valley," he said, adding that the units would cost \$30,000 to \$1.5 million.

Central Valley farmers protest high-speed rail

Kings County is loudest of foes who say they have been ignored by project leaders

By Michael Cabanatuan, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Thurs., July 5, 2012

Hanford, Kings County -- California is poised to begin building the nation's first high-speed rail system early next year, eventually sending trains zipping from San Francisco to Los Angeles as fast as 220 mph.

But first the High-Speed Rail Authority must get the Legislature, and then the Central Valley, on board.

Should high-speed rail officials persuade lawmakers to fund construction of the first 130-mile stretch, they'll need to quickly rebuild support in the San Joaquin Valley, where poor community relations have soured already skeptical farmers and local leaders, overshadowed hopes of economic development, and fueled opposition that could slow or stop arrival of the fast trains.

This week, state legislators are expected to vote on whether to release state bond money that voters approved in 2008 to start building the high-speed railroad from Madera to the outskirts of Bakersfield. The federal government has promised \$3.3 billion, but California needs to chip in \$2.7 billion.

Gov. Jerry Brown is pushing for the funding, but with deep budget cuts and a struggling economy, opposition to the \$68 billion high-speed rail project has swelled statewide, according to polls, and passage is uncertain. "We've given them the best plan, one that's responsive to criticism, and we hope they approve" the funding, said Dan Richard, chairman of the High-Speed Rail Authority.

Nearly as critical as the funding is the support of the project in the San Joaquin Valley. Home to some of the nation's richest farmland, concerns rooted in protecting the rural lifestyle have blossomed into a campaign to stop the train.

Farmers and landowners in different parts of the valley have filed four lawsuits, but the fiercest opposition is in Kings County, which produced more than \$2.2 billion in crops in 2011 - everything from almonds and apricots to cherries and cotton.

Driving south on Highway 43 from Fresno to Hanford, the county seat, signs in the some of the orchards read: "Here comes high-speed rail; there goes my farm." At the county line, a large sign declares, "Kings County says NO to high-speed rail."

'Hot spot' in the state

"Up and down the valley, wherever you go, people are opposed to this," said John Tos, who runs Tos Farms near Hanford. "But Kings County is the hot spot in the whole state of California."

Kings County, and Tos, are plaintiffs in a suit challenging plans to start high-speed rail in the valley on the grounds that those plans violate the high-speed rail bond measure. A judge in June ruled the suit premature but allowed its return if the High-Speed Rail Authority proceeds with its plans.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. While farmers were always wary of the impact on farmland, there also was a feeling that high-speed rail would help the Central Valley, the fastest-growing part of the state, by making it less isolated, more appealing to employers and more connected to the rest of the state. But those feelings faded. Residents, particularly farmers, complain that high-speed rail officials have been arrogant and unhelpful, providing little information or dismissing their concerns.

Tos, a fourth-generation family farmer who stands to lose dozens of acres to high-speed rail, said the tracks will limit access to his land, force workers to drive miles around the tracks, spew more pollution into the air and create dangerous conditions, especially in the valley's thick winter fog. Dividing orchards also will also destroy complex irrigation systems and rip out mature nut trees in the peak years of their productivity.

"We paid big dollars for land like this," said Tos, standing in a walnut orchard. "God's not making any more farmland. We have to use what we have."

Richard, appointed by Gov. Brown last August to help reform the authority and revive support for high-speed rail, says Kings County is one of the biggest challenges. The area has a history of top-quality farmland and preserving its agricultural territory and heritage. But avoiding the county is difficult because of the need to follow existing rail lines and highways as much as possible to build an alignment straight enough for trains to travel more than 200 mph.

"That swings us into farmland or through downtown Hanford, where we would affect over 1,200 buildings," he said.

The authority hasn't helped itself. A little more than a year ago, before Richard was appointed, the Kings County Board of Supervisors sent the authority a list of 61 questions. Nobody ever responded, Richard said.

"They were understandably unhappy with that," said Richard, who agreed to a series of meetings between authority representatives, including himself, and county supervisors to try to work out some of the issues before a final alignment is selected this summer.

But at a June 12 meeting in Hanford, supervisors and high-speed rail critics accused Richard of being a smooth-talking bureaucrat trying to soothe the restless locals without providing information or making changes.

Plenty of questions

"It seems like your staff is not prepared when they come down here. We should not meet just to meet," said Supervisor Doug Verboon. "We hear you on TV and on the radio talking about how great this project is, and how you're working with the community. Well, you're not working with Kings County."

The county's concerns include preserving the popular Amtrak San Joaquin rail service, keeping construction trucks from clogging roads and easing the process of relocating displaced farms. Everyone from the public works director to the sheriff to the planning director had questions.

Richard acknowledged their frustration, blaming some of the authority's nonresponsiveness on state and federal laws concerning environmental reviews, but said he would push the agency to provide answers.

Critics, however, remain skeptical.

"Are they building this in the Central Valley because they think we're poorer, not as smart and won't hire lawyers to sue?" said Frank Oliveira, a farmer and leader of Californians for High-Speed Rail Authority, a Kings County group fighting high-speed rail.

This isn't the first time Kings County has fought a railroad. In 1880, a dispute over land titles between settlers and Southern Pacific Railroad officials turned into a shootout memorialized in the 1901 Frank Norris novel, "The Octopus." Seven people died.

"The settlers took it into their own hands," Tos said. "We have to go through the court system. And it could take years. That's what we hope."

Support in Merced, Fresno

Farm bureaus throughout the Central Valley and boards of supervisors in four of the six Central Valley counties through which high-speed rail would pass have opposed the project, most in the past year. But Merced and Fresno counties remain strongholds of support, as do the cities that share their names.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin has been one of the most active supporters of the project, along with San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee. Fresno, which would have a station and possibly a maintenance facility, believes high-speed rail will spur economic growth. The cities also have sparked a movement of college students and young professionals who have mounted pro-high-speed-rail campaigns.

Underground landmark

But even in Fresno, far from the verdant orchards of Kings County, the authority's lack of communication has caused concern. The owners of Forestiere Underground Gardens, a century-old state and national historic landmark that drew 15,000 visitors last year, fear vibrations from construction of high-speed rail and a highway overpass could damage the 50-room subterranean home and garden.

Sicilian immigrant Baldassare Forestiere dug the maze-like complex by hand, starting in 1906 and continuing for nearly 40 years, after discovering that hardpan, a concrete-like rock layer beneath the soil, made his land unfit for a citrus farm.

Instead, he turned it into an ever-expanding home, complete with citrus trees and other plants, on three-levels below the surface.

Valery Forestiere and Lynn Forestiere Kosewski, the creator's great nieces, are not opposed to high-speed rail, but say the authority has offered them little information and few assurances that construction won't damage the 10 acres of gardens.

Until Forestiere complained at a May authority meeting, the only contact they'd had was a mailed notice, addressed to "Occupant," informing them of the project and a community meeting. High-speed rail officials are now talking with the family.

They also worry that the construction will eliminate their parking area and create too much noise and dust.

"If that happens, we'll just have to close down for those two years," Forestiere said, "and hope there's not too much damage."

Richard acknowledged that repairing strained community relations will be difficult. And if the Legislature funds the project, improving those relationships could be critical to preventing litigation from slowing construction of the first stretch, which must be completed by 2017 to receive the federal funding.

"Frankly, we have a lot of past history to overcome, a big hole to dig ourselves out of," Richard said. "There are a lot of questions that should have been answered a long time ago. ... We should have done things much differently. The question now is: Can we catch up?"

Busy summer for Burton School District

Big projects close to completion

Recorder staff

Porterville Recorder, Wed., July 3, 2012

With the regular school year out for the summer, the Burton School District is busy with a large array of construction, repair, upgrading and refurbishing at its 10 school sites.

Leading the long list of projects are two ongoing construction sites, the district's new Lombardi school — one with 36 classrooms, library, administration and multi-purpose building; and the completion of Summit Charter Collegiate Academy's additions — 22 classrooms, 10 new restrooms and the gymnasium with and indoor/outdoor stage and outdoor amphitheater.

"We're very excited. We're real close to completing the work at Summit Charter Collegiate," said Wendy Jones, assistant superintendent business services. "Then we will have a lot to move. We have 560 kids who will be attending in the new two-story building. We have to have everything ready and we've been assured it will be."

In the meantime, staff is working frantically putting desks together, Jones said.

In addition to the SCCA project, there is a lot of activity on the new campus — Summit Charter Academy Lombardi Campus — on Lombardi Street.

"Glass is going in, the road is going in. There are big metal, rusty colored poles that will be the shade structure, making us green," Jones said. "There is a lot of activity on that campus. It's moving along."

The Lombardi campus should be completed by late fall or early winter, Jones said.

Aside from the new construction, Burton School District is also busy installing a new intercom system at Burton Elementary School, repairing asphalt play courts at Summit Charter Academy Mathew Campus, as well as sealing and applying asphalt at various sites, said Tracy Tucker, director of maintenance, operations and transportation.

Other summer projects include pressure washing all roofs, installing a fire sprinkler at the Mathew Campus and with ongoing maintenance of the grounds sprinkler systems.

Several sites will receive new flooring, other sites new projectors.

"We're extremely busy. Not only are we doing routine waxing and carpet cleaning, but we also have lots of small air condition units — 389 of them — we are working on — cleaning every one of their coils and condensers," Tucker said. "We're testing all fire alarm systems during the summer, doing routine maintenance, interior and exterior work, from installing knobs to removing deceased trees."

Hand dryers are getting installed to save cost, and Southern California Edison is installing power interrupters on every air conditioning unit in the district.

"That should save us about \$70,000 a year on our electrical bill," Tucker said. "That's a big project this summer."

New fiber optic lines to the portable classrooms at Jim Maples Academy.

The installation of a pulse machine for particulate traps in the district's school buses will be accomplished by a grant through the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The list is endless, Tucker said, and one that is keeping his team — including three regular staff and his four groundsmen, busy through the summer.

"Honestly, I have a really good group to work with. I couldn't do it without them," Tucker said. "They all really care about everything, treating the places like it's their own home."

