

Rubio to budget leaders: Restore school bus funds

Avenal Chimes, Thur., Feb. 2, 2012

Senator Michael J. Rubio (D – Shafter)—along with a bipartisan coalition of legislators in the California State Assembly and California State Senate—sent a letter to the Chairs of the two legislative Budget Committees urging support for SB 81.

SB 81 replaces the midyear \$248 million cut to Home-to-School Transportation funding with an across-the-board cut to all districts in California. As the school bus cuts are currently structured, rural districts suffer a greater impact than school districts in suburban or other communities since students are oftentimes bused across many miles to reach the nearest school.

Beyond the clear impacts to the bottom line of school districts, cutting school transportation funds would affect hardworking families in the Central Valley that may not have alternatives for getting their children to school. Alternatively, students may be forced to walk along unsafe streets for longer distances before and after school.

After meeting with several school district officials in the Central Valley, Senator Rubio decided to author the letter and solicit the signatures of his legislative colleagues so that the unique interests of highly impacted communities will remain at the forefront of upcoming budget discussions.

“SB 81 prevents school districts in the Valley from having to cut school bus transportation, endangering the lives of children, placing a greater economic burden on already struggling families and dirtying our air as more cars will be on our streets twice a day to get kids to and from school,” Senator Rubio said. “The letter that we sent to Senator Mark Leno and Assemblyman Bob Blumenfeld clearly highlights how suburban communities must share the pain of these devastating cuts and not be placed squarely on the backs of rural school districts and families that already struggle every day to make ends meet.”

[Stockton Record commentary, Wed., Feb. 1, 2012:](#)

Valley air a priority? We'll see

By Michael Fitzgerald

Jared Blumenfeld, a regional chief of the Environmental Protection Agency, whisked through Stockton the other day, announcing a plan to clean Valley pollution.

"Four times more people die in the San Joaquin Valley from air pollution than they do from traffic fatalities," Blumenfeld said.

"If we had a tornado that swept through the Valley and 200 people died, it would be a huge national crisis. We have literally thousands of people dying from air pollution, but it's invisible. You just don't see those people."

Excuse me. We see those people.

We have lived with the Valley's appallingly degraded environment all our lives.

We have watched our kids stop running on the playground and suffer asthma attacks. We have come out of the San Joaquin River with cuts that don't heal because of bacteria.

We have watched the Delta, our main natural wonder, bled white by a system of dams and canals the federal government helped to build - which allows agriculture to flourish, but which also sustains a system that pollutes the air, kills the Delta and cements a low-wage economy that perpetuates social problems.

One-third of the Valley's 4 million residents face high degrees of environmental risks that probably will harm their health or shorten their life, a recent University of California, Davis, study found.

The phrase "crime against humanity" suggests itself. But we'll settle for "environmental injustice."

"There are many more environmental hazards identified by area residents than are documented in state and federal regulatory inventories," the UC Davis study added.

In other words, government doesn't even know how bad it is here. So I assume Mr. Blumenfeld was referring to someone else who doesn't see those people. We are those people.

Anyway, Blumenfeld presented a local railroad company with \$5 million to run cleaner locomotives. Critics denounced this gesture as merely symbolic; Valley air needs a \$3 billion cleanup.

But Blumenfeld was on point. "Mobile sources," such as vehicles moving goods, create most Valley air pollution. Swapping dirty rides for cleaner ones is key to cleaner air.

The plan calls for reducing PM-2.5 particles (microdust that lodges in lungs and harms health) 7 percent a year until 2014.

Because that goal is simply stated, progress toward it can be measured. This is a big improvement over most pollution regulators, who speak in a sort of gibberish.

"This language is an attempt to put our top priorities in a way that the public can understand so that we can be accountable," said Kerry Drake, associate director of the Air Division for EPA region 9.

By all accounts, Blumenfeld is more engaged in the Valley than his predecessors. When's the last time you saw the EPA's regional administrator around here?

On the other hand, this is the EPA's first-ever Valley strategic plan. Considering Stockton has been around since 1847, I'd say the attention was overdue.

The plan also addresses polluted Valley water. It proposes to reduce selenium, one of Valley water's main contaminants, through more stringent regulation.

Should have been done years ago. Yet other federal agencies rejected the EPA's 2000 selenium-reduction proposal, sending the agency back to the drawing board for a decade.

In another two years, the EPA ought to have the proper grasp of the bio-accumulation of selenium into the web of Valley aquatic life, said Karen Schwinn, associate director of the EPA's regional Water Division.

Appropriate reductions supposedly will follow.

Other plan elements bear more strongly on the lower San Joaquin Valley, where residents of poor villages don't even have clean drinking water.

It seeks, for instance, to reduce farm workers' exposure to toxic pesticides. A nice element of environmental justice, and good for the Valley karma.

"What we are trying to do in that plan is what we can do," said Schwinn. "We're not going to solve the entire problems in the Valley. They are tremendous." But, "The San Joaquin Valley is one of our regional administrator's highest priorities."

We'll see.

Sacramento Be editorial, Wed., Feb. 1, 2012:

Buyers will be key to state goal of cleaner cars

The California Air Resources Board has pushed the envelope yet again.

The most aggressive clean air rule-making body in the country unanimously approved new regulations last week that mandate car manufacturers to cut smog emissions from new vehicles by 75 percent by 2025 and greenhouse gases by 34 percent.

To produce that level of emission reductions, CARB has set an ambitious target. The aim is that 15.4 percent of cars sold in California in 2025 will either be hybrids, which run partially on gasoline and electricity, or pure zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) powered by electric batteries or hydrogen fuel cells.

As CARB chairwoman Mary Nichols said after the vote, "This is really a historic new chapter in California's history with the automobile."

But the history-bending rules will do what they are designed to do – reduce pollution and cut greenhouse gases – only if the public buys the new clean cars in the volumes predicted.

That's the big uncertainty. As they implement the new rules, regulators must do what the businesses they are regulating have to do, keep a sharp eye on the market and be prepared to pivot.

In past years automakers have sued to block CARB rules. This time, somewhat reluctantly, they supported the new rules. According to a spokeswoman for the Auto Manufacturers Association, car companies already produce 35 models of CARB-designated clean cars and they, too, want to see that market segment grow.

But market share for hybrids, electric, and fuel-cell cars is still quite small, about 2.1 percent of all sales nationwide in 2011, and that is down from 2.7 percent in 2009.

The California New Car Dealers Association remains adamantly opposed to the new rules. Dealers note that electric and hybrid vehicles now on the market cost between \$13,000 and \$11,000 more on average than comparable gasoline-powered cars. Moreover, they require a change in consumer habits. Drivers will need to calculate how far they can go on a charge, for example.

Will the necessary infrastructure be in place, hydrogen fueling stations in the case of fuel-cell cars or charging stations for electric vehicles? And how long will it take to complete a charge or refuel with hydrogen?

Also, success will depend on the price of gasoline. If it remains relatively flat or goes lower, sales of electric vehicles are likely to fall. Roger Niello, a local car dealer, says he and his fellow dealers look at regulations from the "transaction level" where the customer meets the car. Holding on to inventory that does not move is costly both in the loss of time and opportunity for profits from sales of vehicles that customers want to buy.

The Obama administration has poured \$2 billion of stimulus funds into trying to jump-start the electric car industry. So far, results have been mixed. New factories have been built and thousands of new jobs created, but some companies that received stimulus funds have gone bankrupt.

The administration in Washington, like regulators in California, is waiting and hoping electric car sales eventually take off. Both the economy and the environment could use the lift.

Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Wed., Feb. 1, 2012:

Worst winter air pollution since '80s? No way

By Mark Grossi

Is this the worst air-quality winter since the 1980s? I've heard some activists say that, but I don't agree with it.

Don't get me wrong, the San Joaquin Valley's air has been under a soot siege since early December. For more than seven weeks, there were daily PM-2.5 violations.

But I looked back randomly in the California Air Resources Board data at the 2002-2003 winter. And I counted more violations.

Those were truly rotten times for the breathing public. There were no prohibitions for burning wood in fireplaces on bad days.

From October to Jan. 31, I counted 87 violations -- and by the end of March, there were 111.

This year, there have been 68 violations so far. February and March are not usually as bad as the other months, so I'm thinking there won't be more than 111 violations this season.

Now back to reality.

It's nearly a decade later, and this improvement is nowhere near being dramatic. According to some asthmatics I know, it's not helping at all.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2012:](#)

Loves his vehicles

I love my internal combustion engine-powered vehicles. I own three. My favorite is the 1955 Willys M38A1. It has a carburetor sitting atop the four cylinder block, and that's about it. It sucks in gas, and occasionally blows out smoke. I will drive it until some politically appointed, unelected, enforcer from the California Air Resources Board comes to confiscate it.

I believe there is a place for electric vehicles, and that is on the golf course -- for those who find it difficult to walk that far.

Mike Haines, Fresno