

Valley achieves key clean-air mark

By Maria G. Ortiz-Briones, staff writer

Vida en el Valle, Thursday, Nov. 21, 2013

FRESNO — The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board is asking federal officials to lift annual penalty mandate and approve the Valley's attainment of the one-hour ozone standard.

The board voted last Thursday to submit a formal request to the federal Environmental Protection Agency to declare the Valley in attainment of the key standard and lift the \$29 million penalty mandate which Valley residents have been paying since late 2010.

Air district officials said this is the first time in recorded history that the San Joaquin Valley had zero violations of the hourly ozone standard established under the federal Clean Air Act for 2013. The official ozone season runs from March through October.

In 2004, EPA classified the Valley as "Extreme" non-attainment for this standard, meaning that reaching the standard, at that time, was deemed impossible. "It's been a long, hard road," said board member Judy Case, a Fresno County supervisor. Reaching this milestone has been the key focus of the Valley's air quality-management strategies for more than two decades.

District officials said the achievement could be accomplished thanks to Valley business investing over \$40 billion in modernization and compliance; grants incentives over \$500 million which resulted in more than 100,000 tons of emissions reduced as well as public education and participation.

"Achieving this historic milestone provides a measurable return on the great investment and sacrifice that Valley business and residents have made," said Hubert Walsh, vice chair of the District board and Merced County supervisor. Jaime Holt, chief communication officer for the air district, said the request will be sent to the U.S. EPA, which will consider the district request.

In 1996, the Valley experienced 281 violations of this hourly standard throughout the eight-county region. The number of violations dropped to only seven in 2012 and zero in 2013. The air district covers an area of 25,000 square miles from Stockton to Bakersfield and is one of only two areas in the country designated as "extreme nonattainment" of the standard. The other area is in Southern California, the Los Angeles-area South Coast Air Basin, which continues to be in violation.

It could take at least one year for the federal agency to make a decision, said Holt. If the request is not granted, Valley residents and business would continue to pay the annual penalty, which was imposed in 2010. The penalty comes as a surcharge on vehicle registration fee.

The district efforts also includes adopting, implementing and enforcing more than 500 stringent air quality rules which have help to reduce 80 percent of emissions.

"Our families now enjoy air quality that is 80 percent better than when the district was formed in 1992. Our journey to cleaner air continues, but today marks a tremendous milestone," said Steve Worthley, air district board member and Tulare County supervisor.

However, air board agrees the battle for clean air needs to continue. "We have a long way to go," Case said. Board member William O'Brien, a Stanislaus County supervisor agrees with Case.

"We might have won a battle, but we haven't won the war yet," O'Brien said adding the district still needs public help to meet other standards – the eight-hour ozone standard. "Today is a great day, but it's not done yet." Air activist warned district officials about making a big celebration of this achievement before it's been approved by the EPA.

"When EPA approves this, it's cause for celebration," said Tom Frantz, from the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition. "This declaration sounds great but it's not proven yet." Frantz who is from Shafter in Kern County told the board he was skeptical the EPA would approve or agree with the board's request.

"We have been involved in this since the beginning. We feel that we need to be more cautious," said Sarah Sharpe from Fresno Metro Ministry. "Progress is significant, but we need to remind you that this is an old standard, but we haven't met the new standard."

"It's important to recognize the progress we have made," said Cesar Campos from the Central California Environmental Justice Network. Campos said his organization doesn't want the public to be misguided by the announcement which might be interpreted by people as the Valley having clean air.

In response to activist concerns, said Skip Barwick, chair of the Valley Air District board said "I wish people will give us credit for what we have done. "We have a lot of work ahead of us," Barwick said, adding that achieving the one-hour standard "can't go unnoticed."

Council OKs bike plan, hoping to address safety

By Theo Douglas, staff writer

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The Bakersfield City Council on Wednesday approved a Bicycle Transportation Plan that even its advocates said highlights the dangers of city riding.

Alta Planning & Design, which produced the eight-chapter plan with a \$120,000 county clean air grant, found that the numbers of collisions involving Bakersfield cyclists dropped during four of five years between 2006-2010 -- but that 40 percent of accidents involved cyclists younger than 18, and 26 percent of crashes happened during the after-school hours of 2 to 5 p.m.

The number of bicycle-related collisions dropped every year but 2008, from 56 in 2006 to 49 in 2010, according to plan data from Kern County Sheriff's Office and Bakersfield Police Department. During 2007 and 2008, 54 bicyclists were in collisions each year.

The plan reveals that 69 percent of collisions were broadside crashes, "(indicating) those involved were either not obeying traffic control devices (e.g. signals, stop signs) or ensuring it was safe to cross."

Alta project manager Jennifer Donlon-Wyant said in an interview that the young age of so many accident victims makes it crucial for the city to implement bicycle education and safety programs, and increase bike lanes on smaller streets.

"While the community appreciates the bike lane on the large arterials, they're not very comfortable on them," Donlon-Wyant said.

Kern River Parkway bike trail co-founder Rich O'Neil said in an interview that he supports the plan, but thinks it needs more Class 1 bike paths like the one along the river, which would be separate from vehicle traffic and, he believes, safer.

Community Development Director Douglas McIsaac said in an interview that the city is trying to educate riders, and applied for a \$350,000 Caltrans grant earlier this year to educate young riders on safe routes to school, but did not receive it.

McIsaac told the council that the recommended additions to existing bike paths would cost \$34.2 million and represent 260 miles of improvements -- which could be built as grants are received.

"I want to emphasize that this plan does not require or obligate the city to conduct these improvements," McIsaac said.

"What it does do however, it will make the city eligible to apply for grants from the state of California that it otherwise would not be eligible for."

The plan also makes the city eligible to pursue federal grants to augment its existing 144 miles of bike paths. It met with enthusiastic support Wednesday from five residents who urged the city to vote yes.

"It's important for us to recognize that data and the fact that we need better infrastructure and safer routes for families and children," said Bakersfield City School District board member Andrae Gonzales.

The council approved the plan 5-0, with Ward 5 Councilman Harold Hanson absent and Vice Mayor Ken Weir abstaining.

"I don't think there's anything in the plan that talks about someone forcing an educational plan on people that are on bikes and are going to be using our transportation grid, but it sure would be nice," said Ward 2

Councilman Terry Maxwell, noting that "the vast majority of people on bikes aren't following any rules at all."

"I'm excited that we do something for children's safety and get children active in the community, give them safe routes to school," said Ward 4 Councilman Bob Smith, a longtime cycling advocate.

[Stockton Record editorial, Thursday, Nov. 21, 2013:](#)

Breathing a little easier

San Joaquin Valley air officials celebrated, although they stopped short of high-fives and chest bumps.

They've done it. They've made history.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District declared recently that the region has achieved a federal pollution standard. It needs a stamp of approval from the Environmental Protection Act before it's official.

The price tag for this two-decade effort to reach a "federal standard" was, gulp, \$40 billion.

There's no question the air is bad in the district. It's among the worst in the country.

It's certainly galling to some that Stockton is lumped in with Bakersfield and other southern parts of the Valley, where the air is considerably worse. But it's the reality of the situation: All of the Valley is in this together.

What does it mean to you?

Potentially, \$12 a year. That's the DMV annual fee per vehicle that is required because the Valley district had not met standards.

But multiply that \$12 by each vehicle in the Valley and it becomes a huge number. Drivers have essentially been helping foot the bill for polluting businesses that are required by law to pay extra fees when a basin fails to meet standards. But the EPA allowed the air district to also spread the cost to drivers.

Reaching the air standard has been a long and at times frustrating process. A so-called "one-hour" ozone standard was set in 1979 and stayed intact for more than a quarter century. In 2005, it was revoked in favor of a much tougher eight-hour standard.

That frustrates some in the northern part of the Valley. Stockton hasn't been in violation of the "old" standard since 1999.

"This is an old, old standard and we have many ozone standards that are more health protective that we are a very long way from achieving," Sarah Sharpe of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition said. "We still have a severe air pollution problem and our health is still in danger many days."

The next step belongs to the EPA. It will review the air district's claims and decide whether the federal standards have been met. An ultimate decision on the DMV fee will be made after the EPA's findings.

There are a few things to finalize before the Valley can celebrate an accomplishment that air district chief Seyed Sadredin calls "historic."

Nonetheless, the progress is of great importance to all living and, of course, breathing Valley residents.