

Police Segway-ing into future

Manteca may spend \$46K for personal transport vehicles

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor

The Manteca Bulletin, Fri., March 29, 2013

Manteca is about to start segueing from fossil fuel to electric power to move police officers around town.

And the vehicle of choice is a Segway.

The Manteca City Council on Tuesday is expected to accept a \$46,775 grant from the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District for the purchase of six alternative-fuel personal transport vehicle with two wheels. Segway is the sole source provider for such alternative fuel transport vehicles.

In a report to the council, Police Chief Nick Obligation noted they will "increase personnel coverage and productivity."

Mayor Willie Weatherford, a former police chief himself, said on Thursday he hadn't yet read the staff report but figured the Segways would be a solid tool for policing.

"You can use it downtown and to patrol the Tidewater Bikeway," Weatherford noted.

Besides being able to go where patrol units can't easily get to, Segways have another advantage. They are zero emission vehicles.

The city - like other California jurisdictions - is under the gun of a state mandate to cut its carbon footprint of greenhouse gases by 2020.

Segways have been effectively used by other police departments to maximum their community policing, to work festivals and large crowds, and as an alternative means to deal with major disasters. A growing number have switched their bicycle patrols to Segways.

Bridgeport Police Chief Bryan Norwood in Connecticut indicated in a case study that, "in general, if a municipality is using community-based policing as their platform, the Segway PT is the tool. It allows cops to get out of their cars, be in touch with people and create dialog. It's one of those tools that the cops say 'Wow, I didn't know you could use it that way. For us, it has been a big success.'"

Some departments use them to issue parking tickets.

There are also fire agencies that use them to move emergency medical personnel around at major events where there are lots of people in attendance.

Basic Segways have a top speed of 12.5 mph. Charging their batteries for an hour provides two hours of operation at a cost of about five cents in electricity. In addition to the operator, Segways can accommodate up to 10 pounds of cargo.

This is not the first time Manteca has taken a pro-active stance in seeking grants to implement green technology in a bid to save money. It has two cutting edge hybrids refuse trucks - the first of their respective genres on the West Coast - collecting garbage and recyclables in Manteca. They emit significant less pollution, consume less gas, and reduce costly brake work by 75 percent.

The city also is switching out street lights to more energy efficient bulbs to reduce energy costs as well.

The City Council meets at 7 p.m. at the Civic Center, 1001 W. Center St.

Fresno offers Madera County a growth peace plan

By George Hostetter and Kurtis Alexander, staff writers

The Fresno Bee, Sunday, March 31, 2013

Fresno City Hall is pitching a peace plan to Madera County in their war over growth: Your sovereignty loses, our crumbling neighborhoods win.

Considering the powerful folks watching from afar, it may not be such a bad deal for the county.

Stranger still, the only casualty from such a deal could be the ideals of Mayor Ashley Swearengin's inner-city revitalization plans.

City Manager Mark Scott has sent a letter to Madera County supervisors seeking a parley at the summit. Scott wants serious talks about the huge Tesoro Viejo project and, more importantly, the nature of government independence in a Valley perhaps grown too complex for its pioneer, don't-tread-on-me heritage.

"We're not trying to tell anybody, 'We're right, you're wrong,' " Scott said in an interview. There are lots of moving pieces.

City Hall recently sued Madera County over McCaffrey Homes' proposed Tesoro Viejo residential-retail project north of the San Joaquin River. The project is in the middle of a long-planned Rio Mesa community -- think 250,000 people someday -- that gives City Hall nothing but heartburn.

Fresno officials have similar beefs all over the place.

Fresno County's supervisors have given the green light to a town-sized project slated for the outback near Friant Dam that peeves City Hall.

Fresno officials have spent a half-century looking covetously at neighboring Clovis and its growth machine now rolling toward the eastern foothills.

Sanger, Fowler and Kerman with their small-town charms and pro-growth city halls flank Fresno everywhere else, adding to the big city's frustration.

In the midst of this envelopment, Swearengin desperately tries to make good on her promise to energize inner-city Fresno. At the heart of this effort is a 2035 general plan update that aims to end sprawl and deliver nearly half of future growth to older, often struggling neighborhoods.

And watching it all are two players with big sticks -- Sacramento and Washington, D.C., lawmakers increasingly impatient with the woes that seem to follow in growth's wake.

Scott in his letter identifies opening-round talking points: Regional planning, tax-sharing, development fees, governance. All is familiar stuff guaranteed to get the public's blood boiling.

But Scott's letter also seems to signal a new awareness in the Swearengin administration. City officials last April embraced a general plan theme that would marshal City Hall power against sprawl, wherever it reared its head. Scott now suggests to Madera County leaders (take note, all you Friant Ranches and Kermans) that growth on Fresno's outskirts is fine -- as long as City Hall gets a cut of the action.

Projects such as Tesoro Viejo are inevitable, Scott said.

"What we want to do is get involved in some broader planning that considers the whole metropolitan area."

Scott's letter to Madera County says city officials have no intention of stopping their neighbor from growing.

But citing the possibility of a Modesto-size metropolis just across the county line, city officials make clear that they want to do all they can to reduce the impact of tens of thousands of additional people living in the area.

With that in mind, city officials spell out a number of terms -- some monetary -- that they expect of Madera County, which, if met, would prompt them to back off their lawsuit over Tesoro Viejo.

The development proposes 5,200 homes. It's the first of many projects expected on the Madera County side of the water -- up next are other parts of Rio Mesa, Gunner Ranch West and Gateway Village -- and it prompted the city last year to sue over concerns of traffic, air pollution and excessive demands on infrastructure.

In the letter, city officials ask the county to levy an impact fee on each new home that is built. The fee is meant to offset expenses that the city expects to incur. City officials also request discussion of another fee to address the urban blight that can sometimes come with sprawl.

The city wants the Governor's Office to mediate the discussions.

Mike McCoy, who has represented Gov. Jerry Brown's administration in earlier talks with the city, said Fresno's downtown revitalization and growth on the outskirts are not mutually exclusive.

The region will see enough new residents in the coming decades, particularly with the advent of high-speed rail, to warrant development on several fronts, McCoy said.

The key to smart growth, which has become an increasingly popular concept in Sacramento, is making sure people don't have to drive long distances for their basics, such as work, school and shopping, McCoy said. And this can be done with growth both inside the city and out.

"This is the cake-and-eat-it-too scenario," McCoy said.

Madera County officials haven't formally responded to the city's settlement offer. But their first impression isn't good.

"Pull your lawsuit and then let's talk. Don't use that for leverage," Madera County Supervisor David Rogers said.

Rogers' reaction is just the latest in the increasingly testy relationship between not only the city and Madera County but between the city and Fresno County.

The city has sued Fresno County for approving the proposed 2,500-home Friant Ranch project near Millerton Lake. City officials cite similar concerns with the Friant project as they do with nearby Tesoro Viejo.

Friant Ranch is just one of a handful of proposed developments under Fresno County's jurisdiction. Mira Bella, Millerton New Town and Brighton Crest also are on the list. The latest, planned by the Assemi family, calls for a health-sciences university above the reservoir.

"It's unrealistic for the city to say to everybody around them, 'You've got to stop building,' " Fresno County Supervisor Henry Perea said.

Perea is among many who say the city's campaign to block growth is beginning to weaken.

A judge recently sided with the county in the Friant Ranch case, though the city is appealing, and an earlier attempt by the city to get the state to reconcile disagreements has gone nowhere.

"These are local-control issues," Perea said. "The city is not in a position to tell others what to do or where people should live."

McCoy, who serves as executive director of the state Strategic Growth Council, and other representatives from the Governor's Office have been meeting with local officials to try to ease tensions.

State officials offer planning expertise and potentially legislative support and funding. However, they don't have the authority to call the shots nor, they say, is that their intention.

Some smart-growth advocates are banking on new planning mandates on counties to deliver a boost to the city's infill efforts. These state requirements, part of Senate Bill 375, are designed to combat global warming.

The Fresno County Council of Governments, made up of public officials from the county's 15 cities, must show by the end of the year how greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced through long-range growth plans.

The exercise is generally a push for compact, urban development.

"It can shed light on what the issues with growth are," said Barbara Steck, deputy director of Fresno COG.

However, as much as some have pushed the county to commit to a future of carbon-free growth, the planning effort is nonbinding, Steck noted, meaning neither the cities nor the county must follow along.

"Over-egg the pudding" -- try too hard -- describes what almost certainly happened a year ago in the Fresno City Council chamber.

Citizens and community activists cheered when the council approved the general plan's "inner-city first" theme. No more paved-over vineyards. No more heart-breaking concentrations of poverty. No more tale of two cities. The council's vote guaranteed it all.

City officials now seem to be acknowledging it was well-meant, but a bit over the top. They're starting to trim hopes to fit reality.

For example, a task force headed by Council Member Lee Brand meets twice a month. Its mission -- devise building codes and developer incentives that make inner-city Fresno as attractive as any outlying housing tract. So far, no eureka moments.

Now comes Scott's letter.

Scott, in an interview last week, said City Hall knows a big city -- call it Rio Mesa, for now -- will someday sit across from Woodward Park on the Madera County side of the river.

"We're fine with a properly planned outcome that ends up with a city of Fresno and a city of Rio Mesa that are good neighbors," Scott said.

How would Fresno throw its weight around on the dozens of cross-border issues generated by growth? Some type of regional government with Fresno at its center?

Scott won't go there. That's what talks are for, he said.

But Scott strongly believes regional responsibility for the fate of Fresno's oldest and most-challenged neighborhoods is both necessary and just.

"There has to be some way that new development helps support existing neighborhoods," he said.

Scott also sees a realistic 2035 general plan that makes urban culture attractive for those so inclined and helps the vulnerable already living in the center while accepting as fact that Big Brother can't tell people where to live.

He said it's better for Madera County and the city to settle things face-to-face atop a summit rather than in a courtroom.

"The one thing we know won't help is if we have uncontrolled new development."