

County transit a trendsetter

By Zachary K. Johnson

Stockton Record, Tuesday, May 21, 2013

STOCKTON - Lest there be any doubt what powers the latest addition to Stockton's bus fleet, the word "Electric" is emblazoned on the sides of the new vehicles, along with curved stripes, crackling with color.

When the two buses start moving passengers through the city next month, San Joaquin Regional Transit District will be the first bus service in the San Joaquin Valley and Northern California using fast-charging electric buses on its transit routes, officials said.

The occasion was feted at a lunchtime gathering at the courtyard at the University Plaza Waterfront Hotel on Monday, where state and local officials said the rollout was an important step toward meeting state and regional goals to combat climate change and reduce emissions.

"We're excited ... to be part of a historic new era of zero-emission public transportation," said Donna DeMartino, RTD's CEO and general manager.

The 35-foot-long Proterra bus has no tailpipe, so there are no emissions. The buses unveiled are expected to begin taking passengers between San Joaquin General Hospital and central shopping malls on Route 51 next month. It can keep up enough power throughout the day in rapid 10-minute charging sessions.

The electricity used to charge the bus might not necessarily be green, so officials say it has an equivalent of about 20 miles per gallon. That's a marked improvement from the roughly three miles a gallon a diesel bus gets, officials said. RTD's hybrid buses get roughly six miles per gallon. By next month, all of the district's Metro routes are expected to be at-least hybrid buses.

Saving fuel saves the district money. The transit district uses about 650,000 gallons of fuel per year.

The buses were bought with a \$2.56 million grant from the California Energy Commission. It's part of about roughly \$53 million in grants awarded in the San Joaquin Valley since 2009 for this and a range of projects, including adding chargers for electric vehicles, Commissioner Janea A. Scott said. "Reducing our petroleum use is necessary to reach our climate change and clean air goals."

Local dignitaries, visitors, staffers and bus riders were able to take a spin around downtown on one of the two new buses after some gave speeches.

"Can you feel the electricity in the air?" said Gary Giovanetti, chairman of the RTD Board of Directors, in what was not the first, nor the last, pun of the day.

Stockton Mayor Anthony Silva said the benefit of the zero-emission buses extended to all of Stockton, not just to people riding the bus. "This project will help support the city of Stockton's commitment to reduce greenhouse gases."

It is a step toward the county's air-quality targets, said Ken Vogel, chairman of the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors.

"This is very important. A great step forward."

Event to offer auto emissions repair vouchers in Merced

By Joshua Emerson Smith

Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, May 18, 2013

MERCED -- This weekend, area residents will likely be lining up for free emissions testing for their cars and trucks, potentially qualifying for \$500 in repair vouchers, under a popular government program to improve air conditions.

The valleywide "Tune In & Tune Up" event has grown dramatically in recent years, according to regional air quality officials. Last year, the program came to 19 locations, up from three in 2010.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has teamed up with the regional nonprofit Valley Clean Air Now to expand the program, bringing it to smaller communities in the Central Valley.

Passenger vehicles are a major source of pollution in the region that the air district has yet to fully address, said Jamie Holt, spokeswoman for the air district.

"We have a relatively old passenger vehicle fleet," she said. "We have folks running around in 10-, 15-, in some cases 20-year-old cars. So those cars emit more. It's really for those folks that have older vehicles that just don't have the finances to be able to make those repairs."

The event in Merced is scheduled for 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Merced County Fairgrounds at 900 Martin Luther King Jr. Way and 11th Street.

The first 525 vehicles that qualify after a free emissions test will receive a \$500 voucher for repairs at a participating smog shop. A list of participating businesses will be available at the event.

Smog certificates will not be available at the event.

Drivers should expect a two-hour wait, according to air district officials. There will be free food and drinks starting at 9 a.m.

"It's been a huge success," Holt said. "In some cases, we have people that show up the night before and camp out."

The air district allocated \$4 million this year to the program. Valley Clean Air Now put in about \$250,000.

Because of the valley's dangerously unhealthy air conditions, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency levies a \$29 million annual fine on residents, collected through a vehicle registration fee.

Those funds are used by the air district to implement air quality improvement programs such as Tune In & Tune Up.

Clearing the air about asthma

Stockton doctor seeks to change misconceptions

By Joe Goldeen

Stockton Record, Monday, May, 20, 2013

STOCKTON - Dr. Greg Bensch would like to see people change their thinking about asthma.

Asthma is a chronic disease, but most people don't look at it that way. A chronic disease is a long-lasting health condition that can be controlled but not cured, such as arthritis, diabetes, heart disease or stroke.

And even though asthma that's left uncontrolled can have serious, even deadly consequences as a person's airways become inflamed and begin to narrow, limiting their ability to breathe, Bensch said the common perception is that once the wheezing, coughing, tight chest and shortness of breath ease up, you're OK again.

Asthma resources

People with asthma can manage and control the disease by following the advice and care plan of their health care provider. For more asthma data, information, tips and resources, visit the following organizations:

- San Joaquin County Public Health Services: sjcphs.org.
- San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District: valleyair.org.
- California Department of Public Health: californiabreathing.org.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: cdc.gov/asthma.
- American Lung Association in California: lung.org/associations/states/california.

"Too many people think of it as episodic, not chronic. We're hoping to enlighten people to the fact that asthma is chronic," said Bensch, a Stockton-based board-certified specialist with the Allergy, Immunology & Asthma Medical Group. He serves as an assistant professor with the Allergy & Immunology Residency Program at San Joaquin General Hospital and is on the board of the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, his specialty is professional association.

The key for Bensch with all his patients, young and old, is "identify, treat and maintain treatment. We're shooting for good control."

Good control means keeping asthma patients away from frequent use of albuterol inhaler treatments and out of the costly emergency room. That is achieved by identifying the triggers that spark an asthma episode, establishing a treatment plan that often includes medications and educating the patient about the importance of complying with that plan.

Twin 10-year-old brothers Julian and Jose Morales, who have been patients of Bensch since both were diagnosed with asthma around the age of 1, have avoided the emergency room because they have managed to comply with their treatment plans. That's no small feat for active boys.

"When we run, sometimes I cough. I get tired playing soccer," Julian said, referring to some common symptoms induced by exercise.

Bensch said the boys have inhalers, but by using their medications as prescribed, they have kept their asthmatic episodes under control.

Bensch uses the latest diagnostic equipment, including spirometry that measures how much air a patient can inhale and exhale and provides the best indicator of an airway obstruction. He would like to see more primary care medical offices adopt this technology to help diagnose asthma sooner.

Nationwide, 1 in 12 people have asthma, including 1 in 11 children, according to the latest information from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"It's an epidemic, especially in kids," Bensch said. And especially in the San Joaquin Valley, where the rate for children is 1 in 5, significantly higher than the state as a whole.

"We have a high pollen count. We're agricultural. We're in a valley with high pollution. We're in a problematic area," Bensch said, adding, "Asthma is the most expensive chronic childhood disease. We spend \$56 billion on this disease state alone. This is clearly a target that costs health care a lot of money."

And there is racial disparity in the disease, according to San Joaquin County's Community Health Status Report for 2011.

The rate of age-adjusted hospitalizations for blacks in San Joaquin County is more than three times higher than for whites, Latinos and Asians, and the rate of emergency department visits by blacks for asthma is three to four times higher.

In an effort to eliminate the disparities, the county's Public Health Services agency established the Obesity & Chronic Disease Prevention Task Force in 2009 to decrease the incidence of asthma and other chronic diseases and their risk factors.

The county also has formed an asthma coalition that has joined with a statewide network of similar organizations to shape policies focused on reducing the environmental triggers of asthma for children in their homes, their schools and other places that they frequent.

In addition to active allergies spurring an asthma attack, other common triggers include tobacco smoke, dust mites, outdoor air pollution, cockroaches and their droppings, pets, mold, smoke from burning wood or grass, chemical fumes, and infections linked to flu, colds and respiratory viruses.