

Group gathers in Modesto to promote electric vehicles in the Central Valley

By Rosalio Ahumada

Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Friday, April 4, 2014

Though he's retired from his job as the transportation director for the Kings Canyon Unified School District, John Clements still drives a school bus, taking children to and from school.

Only now, Clements is driving an all-electric school bus in the rural areas of Reedley, about 20 miles southeast of Fresno. His mission is to get the kids home, using alternative energy that's not damaging the environment.

"It's feasible, it's working," said Clements, who calls himself an electric bus evangelist. "It really does transport kids safely every day. We just do it with a different energy source."

Clements was among a few dozen people who gathered Thursday in Modesto to launch a partnership to push forward the electric vehicle industry in the Central Valley.

The goal of the San Joaquin Valley Electric Vehicle Partnership is to create a fertile environment for the electric vehicle infrastructure to grow throughout the Valley. The group also wants to educate drivers about electric vehicles and make it easier for them to leave their gas-guzzling cars, pickups and SUVs behind.

Jeannie Lam will work as the chairwoman of the group, which was brought together by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. She said the group will start with a three-pronged effort, which includes helping to train those who will work in the industry as it grows.

"The key is we have a partnership now," said Lam, who is the EV business development manager for Nissan North America on the West Coast.

This labor force will include salespeople, mechanics and technicians. Lam said the group's effort includes work to increase electric charging stations throughout the Valley.

Terry O'Day is vice president of NRG eVgo, which is working to create a privately funded and comprehensive electric vehicle ecosystem. He said NRG eVgo is hiring and investing \$10 million to install 20 fast-charging stations throughout the Valley. These larger charging stations would be able to power up vehicles within 30 minutes.

O'Day said it is also looking to install about 1,000 small electric charging stations in the Valley at places such as shopping centers and apartment complexes.

"These are places where you'll already be going," O'Day said. "We will build these charging stations."

He said NRG eVgo expects to break ground on the first of these charging stations in the Valley this summer. The locations have not been announced.

Lam said there are charging stations along the Highway 99 corridor, but more are needed in the Valley. Along the coast, enough stations are available that an electric vehicle driver can travel from Fremont in the Bay Area to Los Angeles without running out of battery power.

"It's a lot more convenient than it was a couple of months ago," Lam said about the electric vehicle industry. "It's moving fast."

The third prong of the group's effort is to educate the public on how easy it is to drive an electric vehicle and how affordable it is to own one through financial incentives.

First, the federal government offers a \$7,500 tax credit for the purchase of an electric vehicle. Then, the state offers a \$2,500 rebate for the purchase. Finally, residents in the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District jurisdiction can receive a \$3,000 rebate from the district.

The district encompasses San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties, along with the San Joaquin Valley Air Basin portion of Kern County. Residents living within those boundaries could qualify to receive \$13,000 in tax credits and rebates for the purchase of an electric vehicle. Lam said a Nissan Leaf costs about \$29,000.

Clements said it took about \$200,000 to build the electric school bus he drives, which is about twice the cost of a regular school bus. But the school district in Reedley paid only \$30,000, because the rest was covered by a grant from the Air Quality Improvement Program.

"If the demand for these vehicles goes up, then maybe the costs will go down," said Clements, who was in Modesto representing the Motiv Power Systems company, which built the bus and other electric vehicles.

David Schene, fleet sales manager at American Chevrolet in Modesto, said he wants to work to make it easy for drivers to buy electric vehicles with something such as the Cash for Clunkers program.

"If you make it easy for them, they'll buy into the concept," Schene said, standing near a white electric Chevy Spark. The business representatives showed off their electric vehicles, which were parked outside the air district's Modesto office Thursday.

Linda Urata, a coordinator with the San Joaquin Valley Clean Cities Coalition, said Thursday's event was attended by representatives from as far away as the Bay Area, Los Angeles and Bakersfield.

"I just found about 50 new friends," Urata said. "We're all going to find ways to work together in the Central Valley."

Ceres police get three electric motorcycles

By Rosalio Ahumada

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The Ceres Police Department has purchased three electric motorcycles for its traffic unit with grant funding from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The grant funding is geared toward creating an air-pollution-free environment in the Central Valley. The Zero DS police motorcycles will be introduced to the public during an event at 2 p.m. Tuesday at the Ceres Community Center, 2701 Fourth St.

Ceres Police Chief Art de Werk said buying the motorcycles is part of an effort to preserve the environment and increase policing efficiencies. "We are also interested in the health benefits for the officers by decreasing their exposure to the exhaust of traditional motorcycles," de Werk said in a news release.

The motorcycles' entire cost was covered by the air district grant. Department officials said they chose the Zero DS motorcycles because of their reliability, low maintenance, battery range and capacity, maneuverability and lightweight chassis.

In addition to traffic enforcement, the motorcycles can be used in enforcement situations that require a stealthy approach, as well as for community outreach and school safety patrols.

The motorcycles are fully equipped with emergency lights and sirens and have storage for patrol gear and emergency medical equipment.

"Police departments rely on their fleet motorcycles and vehicles every day while in the line of duty, and we are proud to be able to play a role in providing a motorcycle that meets police and department needs," said John Lloyd said in the news release. He is the vice president for global sales at Zero Motorcycles, a California-based company.

Bee's Grossi takes second for environmental reporting in Best of the West contest

The Fresno Bee, Saturday, April 5, 2014

Mark Grossi, environmental reporter for The Fresno Bee, has won a Best of the West second-place award in the growth and environmental reporting category for his 2013 series, "Living in a Toxic Land."

The contest began in 1988 and annually draws about 1,000 entries from journalists in the 14 states from the Rockies west to Alaska and Hawaii. Its 15 categories are not divided by newspaper circulation size.

Grossi's series of nine stories spanning most of last year examined key environmental challenges in the San Joaquin Valley, where nearly one-third of its 4 million people live with high pollution and toxic risks as well as poverty, poor education and low English literacy, according to a 2011 University of California at Davis study.

Each story detailed a problem, from Kettleman City -- "ground zero for Valley waste" -- to distribution centers, from West Fresno, the riskiest place to live in California according to one study, to fracking and the fight to deliver clean drinking water to rural communities. Each story also examined the government oversight and possible changes.

Stacy Feldman, managing editor of InsideClimate News who judged the category, said of Grossi's work: "The 'Living in a Toxic Land' series identifies an issue Americans may not want to look at: Hazardous waste and human sewage are being discarded in poor communities of color where people are often voiceless and powerless. The result is a deadly 'dumping ground culture' that is largely unknown.

"Eye-opening from the start, the series connects the dots among poverty, race, dirty air, chemical exposure and ill health in California's San Joaquin Valley in a way that cannot be forgotten or forgiven ... This is highly meaningful public service journalism."

First place went to a team of three Arizona Republic reporters for an examination of the dangers of wildfires in Arizona and what led up to the Yarnell, Ariz., blaze that killed 19 firefighters.

Third place went to a three-person team from the Los Angeles News Group who reported how the Mojave Desert town of Hinkley, made famous in the movie, "Erin Brockovich," is becoming a ghost town.

There were 36 entries in the category.