

Bike month event planned in Merced

In the Merced Sun-Star and Sacramento Bee, Thursday, May 8, 2014

The Merced Bicycle Coalition and health advocates are challenging everyone in town to strap on a helmet and pedal themselves to work at least one day this month.

May is Bike Month, and National Bike-to-Work Day is May 16.

To encourage more Mercedians to participate, the Merced Bicycle Coalition, Merced County Department of Public Health, Mercy Medical Center and Golden Valley Health Centers have planned five stations in town that morning where cyclists can grab snacks or beverages on their way to work.

The so-called energizer stations are planned at Bob Hart Square, Main and Canal streets; Golden Valley Health Center, N Street and Childs Avenue; and UC Merced's Recreation Center at the 5200 Lake Road campus. Mercy Medical Center will offer two stations – one at G Street and Mercy Drive, and the other at M and 27th streets.

This week, the Merced Bicycle Coalition, Merced County Department of Public Health and Golden Valley Health Centers also gave away 250 bicycle helmets to Merced and Winton elementary school children, according to a press release.

“Bicycling safety is a top priority for Bike Month,” said Lisa Kayser-Grant, a member of the bicycle coalition.

The organizers also taught bicycle safety classes to the children. Wednesday was Bike-to-School Day.

It is becoming increasingly easier to get around Merced on a bicycle. The 2013 Bicycle Transportation Plan adopted in September calls for more than 100 projects, including bicycle lanes, paved paths and stripes or shared-road markings – known as “sharrows.”

Since 2004, the city has completed 27 bike-related projects. The 2013 plan calls for \$2.4 million in funds for the next three years, and 106 projects in five years.

About 47 miles of new Class II bike lanes are written into the plan; the city has about 30 miles of lanes now. Class II lanes are the most common and recognizable bikeways, the kind that run along a street and are separated by a white line.

Changes to bike infrastructure in Merced could increase daily ridership, according to estimates in the bike plan. Increasing lanes and other ways to cycle around town promotes fitness in Merced, as well as improving air quality and a cyclist's carbon footprint.

[Fresno Bee commentary, Thursday, May 8, 2014:](#)

Fresno needs new path to better health

By Michael Peterson

Year after year, the Fresno area hovers near the top of the rankings when it comes to bad air. In this year's American Lung Association State of the Air report, Fresno tops the list of the worst polluted areas in the country for particle pollution or soot, measured both on a short-term and annual basis. Fresno is also ranked the fourth-worst area in the country for ozone pollution. So it's no surprise that we also have high rates of pollution-related disease; for example, more than 21% of Fresno County children — and more than 17% of adults — suffer from asthma.

While real progress has been made in chipping away at these smog and soot numbers over time, clearly more needs to be done. There is a new prescription for ailing Valley air — elevating health as a key objective for community planners. Our leaders now have an opportunity to chart a new course for Fresno County's future away from urban sprawl. And for the sake of the health of the people they serve, they must seize this chance.

Over the next few months, city and county leaders will be finalizing local Sustainable Communities Strategies that will shape what happens with transportation and development in Fresno County and other San Joaquin Valley counties over the next 20 years. So far, indications are that the board of the Fresno

Council of Governments (COG) is repeating past sprawl-oriented planning decisions instead of focusing more heavily on the renewal of existing neighborhoods through infill growth patterns that support walking, biking and transit.

Choosing a business-as-usual path would mean more air pollution, more illness and premature death, and millions of dollars lost every year to medical expenses and days lost from school and work.

But there is another way. We can invest first in our downtowns and existing neighborhoods and encourage healthier transportation choices. We can link more places where people live to where they work, go to school and play, with public transportation and biking and walking trails. These common-sense approaches can make a real difference to our air quality, health — and to our bank accounts.

The American Lung Association in California has looked at the planning options the Fresno region could choose for future growth. It finds that if our county takes a hard look at what our existing communities need and chooses a development and transportation strategy designed to cut down on traffic, promote transit, increase physical activity and curb air pollution, it could save our county's families and businesses tens of millions of dollars a year.

The Lung Association's Public Health Crossroads analysis finds that making Fresno County communities 40% more interconnected and walkable would save \$83 million in traffic-pollution-related health costs in 2035 alone, with millions more in savings racking up year after year. In 2035 alone, that would include reductions of 4,600 asthma attacks and other respiratory illnesses in our county because our air would be cleaner.

And giving children and adults realistic options to walk or bike — or to walk a few blocks to catch a bus rather than hopping in the car for every trip — would help curb chronic illnesses including obesity and diabetes, which are heavily influenced by lifestyle. Residents of Fresno should pay attention to an important vote coming up soon at the Fresno COG to adopt our county's first "Sustainable Community Strategy." This vote will either set a course for a healthier future in our existing neighborhoods or continue to put our limited resources into status quo planning.

At very least, Fresno COG should assess the health of our existing neighborhoods and prioritize investment in more transportation choices for communities suffering the most. More than 40% of Fresno County children are obese, and 9% of the people in our county are suffering from diabetes. Making it easy to weave more activity into everyday life would make a real difference in terms of public health and health-care spending, especially in our most disadvantaged communities.

Fresno's top ranking in the American Lung Association's report as having the highest levels of pollution is a reminder that we must do more to protect public health. City and county leaders can set a course, starting now.

Responsible local planning would mean stronger and more sustainable communities, healthier air and people, and a better future for the place we call home.

Dr. Michael Peterson is a pulmonary and critical-care physician, past president of the California Thoracic Society, and a volunteer physician for the American Lung Association in California. He is chief of the UCSF Fresno Medicine program.