

## **Spokes, sweat & gears**

### **Flat terrain and rural scenery make Fresno an ideal place to bike to work.**

By Don Mayhew

The Fresno Bee

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Friant Road before 7 a.m. is the sound of a city stretching from slumber.

Traffic is light but brisk, the hum of wheels on road ebbing and flowing and never quite escaping into silence. The roadside is brown with dirt and dead brush.

The sun peeks over the Sierras, casting long shadows at sharp angles onto the highway.

Even on August days when the temperature will soar to nearly 100, the air is comfortably chilly, washing over exposed skin like the cool of a refrigerator with its door suddenly flung open.

A couple of cows may graze, but they're clearly outnumbered by the new homes being built to the east, where suburbia is busy making its demands on the landscape.

Nobody is likely to confuse these open spaces with San Francisco. But three days a week, William von Kaenel pedals his bike down this section of Friant Road on his way to work, taking a little of the big city with him as he goes.

An anesthesiologist who specializes in pain management, von Kaenel rides for his health.

"If you look at places where people walk a lot, there are a lot of skinny people," von Kaenel says.

"You go there, you spend time as a tourist, you look around, and everyone's walking.

"In Fresno, the only walking people do is to walk from the car in the parking lot to wherever their destination is."

Riding his bike "was a way to make Fresno a virtual San Francisco by spending energy just to get to work."

The doctor has been commuting on two wheels only for the past couple of months.

But it didn't take long to convince him that he'd made a significant lifestyle change for the better.

He's not alone pushing pedals to the office.

Though statistics don't exist, Justin Morgan of the Fresno County Bicycle Coalition says, it appears more Valley residents have begun using their bikes to commute during the past few years.

New and improved bike lanes are making a difference.

So is the realization that Fresno, with its flat terrain and moderate, dry climate, is in many ways an ideal place to cycle.

Many people are in too big a hurry to consider taking an extra 15-20 minutes -- often the difference between driving and riding a bike -- to get to work.

But von Kaenel says his routine actually saves him time.

It takes him about a half-hour to get to his office or the Fresno Surgery Center, where he spends much of his Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Driving might take him half that long.

But von Kaenel says he has an extra half-hour now because he no longer needs to go to the gym, where he found the treadmill "deadly dull" anyway.

"I like being on a bike," von Kaenel says.

"But on a daily basis, the only way it was going to work was if I was going somewhere.

"I couldn't just go around in a big circle. It takes me about 70 minutes round-trip.

"There was no other way I was going to get 70 minutes of cardio[vascular exercise]."

He's working on ways to expand his cycling from three days a week to five.

It can be a logistical challenge, getting the right clothes and whatever else he needs to the right place at the right time.

"I kind of like that, actually," von Kaenel says.

"I have to plan how to get where I need to go in time, when to shower. It requires more mental energy. Eventually, you get a routine, and it becomes effortless."

Ben Medrano, who owned the Fresno bike shop Tri-Sport Unlimited until March and still works there as a consultant, has commuted by bike from his home near Coarsegold for years. It's anywhere from 60-95 miles round trip.

"Dragging your clothes back and forth is a real issue for people," Medrano says.

He usually brings his wardrobe for the week by car one day, then cycles the rest of the week.

"Sometimes I'll drive down and ride home. You have to be creative."

Shawn Ferreria, a forecaster for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, commutes to his office by bike three or four times a week. But he doesn't do Fridays.

"Drivers are in a mad rush to get home," Ferreria says.

Riding through the middle of town heading into the weekend feels hectic and unsafe.

There are other drawbacks. Even with racks and backpacks, cyclists can't carry anywhere near as much as they could inside even the smallest of compact cars.

And not everyone has a shower at the office.

But cycling enthusiasts say those are surmountable obstacles.

Asked about sweating profusely, particularly during summer, Ferreria smiles, opens his desk drawer and whips out a red comb and stick of deodorant.

Kevin Slater, owner of Tri-Sport, says he has a lot of customers who consider commuting by bike.

"But they chicken out," Slater says.

"It takes some scheduling. You have to get in a little early. It takes a while to calm down before you can do anything."

Medrano says most people need merely to wash their faces, pat their hair down and change their shirt after cycling.

"Most people don't need to shower after only 15-20 minutes of biking," Medrano says.

"Now if you have to wear a suit, maybe there's an issue."

But he suggests people try cycling to work just once.

"People perceive it as something that's harder to do than it is," Medrano says.

"It's just so easy to jump into a car."

As great cycling cities go, Fresno is no Freiburg, Germany, where there are twice as many bicycles as cars.

Fresno can't even compete with cities like Davis, where cycling is well established.

Mark Stahler, a Tri-Sport mechanic, used to live in Eugene, Ore.

He says clearly marked bike paths and bike lanes were a given.

In Fresno, "you'll be riding along in a bike lane, and it just ends suddenly," Stahler says.

"It's too bad. Here you have the weather for commuting. There's just such a car culture in California."

Nevertheless, Fresno does have a cycling tradition.

William Saroyan rode a bike from childhood until almost the day he died, in 1981. He delivered telegrams for Western Union in younger days and wrote boastfully about his lightning-fast exploits.

An older, wiser and slower Saroyan could be spotted pushing pedals in his later years on his way to the post office or library.

"A man learns style from everything," Saroyan once said. "But I learned mine from things that move."

Cycling has much to teach us, Saroyan said: "Moving the legs evenly and steadily soon brings the bike rider a valuable knowledge of pace and rhythm, and a sensible respect for timing and the meeting of a schedule."

Other benefits are more obvious. It helps reduce air pollution. It's good exercise and saves money.

"If you like to eat, you get to eat more," Medrano says.

"And gas isn't cheap."

Ferreria points out that commuting by bike saves wear and tear on his car.

"You're putting the wear and tear on your legs," Ferreria says. "But it's good wear and tear."

Cycling is a good way to feel connected to the place where you live.

"When you're in a car, you're basically in a box," Ferreria says.

"You lose perspective what you're driving by. When you're on a bike, you're alert to what's around you."

Theresa Rogerson of Fresno likes being "able to smell everything and see everything and hear everything."

She often commutes along Van Ness Avenue, where "you're just kind of without the usual modern technology transportation infrastructure. There are no traffic lights, no sidewalks, even no dotted lines.

"It feels like you're taking the scenic route all the time."

Cycling can be both calming, particularly for those who become stressed out driving on the freeway, and energizing.

Ferreria "noticed that instead of needing caffeine to get me going in the morning, I had that automatic adrenaline rush."

Medrano says there's another, less physical connection cycling makes for people.

"There's definitely a connection with childhood fun," Medrano says.

"The wind through your hair. That speed rush. Going fast on little tires is fun."

People considering commuting by bike need to design a route first. With a map, they should look for wide streets with bike lanes and little traffic.

On windy days, Ferreria says, he travels along First Street rather than Cedar Avenue near California State University, Fresno, because the buildings break up the breeze better.

Do a test run. Drive the route and look for problem spots.

Is the pavement even? Are there a lot of parked cars? Consider a weekend ride along the route before commuting for the first time.

Try to find a bike buddy. Knowing that someone is counting on you to ride can strengthen your resolve. It also can be safer, particularly in an emergency, when there will be someone there to help.

During summer, ride at a comfortable pace, drink lots of water and don't push too hard.

Carry a change of clothes -- at least a shirt -- in your backpack.

"I don't wear my work clothes on my bike," Ferreria says.

"You become a master at folding clothes. In your backpack, you put only the bare essentials."

Finally, safety is paramount. Helmets are a given. Brightly colored clothing is a good idea, especially if you ride at dawn or dusk.

California law gives cyclists the same rights and responsibilities as drivers.

They must ride in a straight line if riding with other cyclists, blend in with traffic, indicate turns, stop at traffic lights and ride on the right side of the road.

Rogerson says people should resist the temptation to bike on sidewalks, even when traffic gets heavy.

"In some areas, it's legal," Rogerson says.

"But it's the most dangerous place a bicyclist can ride. A sidewalk is the place you're going to be most likely in a collision.

"You've got retail spaces with doors opening onto the sidewalk. People are getting out of cars and coming around corners, using a stroller or wheelchair.

"They don't know somebody is coming along the sidewalk. People don't expect that."

[Editorial, Visalia Times-Delta, Aug. 18, 2003:](#)

## **Say Yes to 198 Plaza Drive Auto Mall**

Visalia's City Council tonight will take up the issue of the development of an auto mall along Highway 198 a little west of Plaza Drive in Visalia.

This project has drawn a lot of attention, both vigorous support and vehement criticism. One thing everyone can agree on: It will change Visalia forever.

We believe those changes will be in Visalia's best interest. And we have considered thoroughly and at length the objections to the project as we have heard them expressed -- in the environmental impact report, in public meetings and in private briefings with opponents and supporters. Our editorial board has given this issue considerable attention. In the final analysis, we believe the reasons for rejecting this project, as passionately held as they are, do not overcome the benefits. We would urge the council to approve.

Why support it?

We urge approval because:

The project does not intrude on Visalia's scenic corridor.

The project is already surrounded by development.

It is on marginal farmland.

Approval keeps a valuable commercial resource in the city.

The auto mall provides sales tax revenue the city needs.

It strengthens Visalia's position as a regional retail center.

It will have minimal visual impact. It is not a Selma mall.

The project supports the 2020 growth plan by encouraging development of downtown, strengthening the retail potential of Mooney Boulevard, and providing an anchor for attractive development along west Highway 198.

If not approved, this project will be built 250 yards to the west. The city of Visalia will have nothing to say about what it looks like. And it will receive no benefit from sales-tax revenue.

Visalia needs it.

The city of Visalia commissioned a study in 2000, the Katz Hollis report, that recommended the city pursue an auto mall to provide more opportunities for auto dealers as well as more choices for consumers.

#### *Ben Maddox auto mall*

Visalia now has an auto district at Ben Maddox Way between Main Street and Tulare Avenue where five auto dealers share close proximity. It is not an auto mall. It is certainly not the regional auto mall recommended in the Katz Hollis report.

That report recommended a mall of at least 35 acres with access to a freeway. There are simply no other locations in Visalia with those qualifications, with the exception of Shirk Street and Highway 198, which is in the scenic corridor and has been rejected as a candidate. Opponents have pointed to various parcels available in the vicinity of Ben Maddox Way. The problem is that they are not contiguous, could not be made into an auto mall and do not have freeway access.

When the city of Visalia developed this auto mall, it was ill-conceived. It wasn't large enough and it did not anticipate the changing auto business.

Even so, two auto dealers have been successful there and wish to remain there. But even Groppetti Auto Group and Serpa Motors have a hard time expanding there.

Issue is critical

The Visalia Auto Plaza would be built on 73 acres of land along Highway 198 that is now growing cotton. This land is not in Visalia's so-called designated "scenic corridor."

This is not a case of loss of valuable farmland that will certainly lead to loss of more farmland. This particular parcel is marginal farmland not surrounded by farms, and it would be developed eventually.

The auto plaza would be home to as many as 10 auto dealerships offering a selection of as many as 5,000 vehicles to car shoppers throughout the southern San Joaquin Valley. Auto malls have proved to offer advantages to both dealers

and consumers: Wide selection, convenience of comparison shopping, addition of brands not now available in Visalia, and ease of access.

Providing for an auto mall is critical for Visalia. The city's position as a regional shopping center has been eroding, especially for automobiles, thanks to competition up and down Highway 99. That's important for the community, because automobile sales represent a significant revenue to the city in the form of the city's share of sales tax. If the mall is rejected, city officials are convinced that auto dealers would move elsewhere, probably just a few hundred yards farther west to be outside the city limits.

Several dealers need the new space to expand, notably Surroz Motors on Mooney Boulevard, which is landlocked. The dealership must move. It has run out of room.

Modern auto dealers require more space for more models, and they are being directed by auto makers to get it. Several dealers in Visalia said they would move out of Visalia if they cannot find that space. Tulare County supervisors have indicated they would welcome them.

This is not responding to a threat, however. It is responding to a need. It allows Visalia to retain a healthy auto business. It could expedite the development of downtown by freeing space on the east side, where the downtown area is destined to grow. It offers more opportunities for Visalia consumers.

#### *Fears will be mitigated*

Many fears have been raised by opponents of the auto mall: [About air pollution](#), water quality, urban sprawl, increased traffic, conflict with the airport and fear of garish signs and lights.

We have read the responses in the environmental impact report. We trust there are mitigation measures for this issues.

The mall will be built and operated by local people. They will not create a mass of schlock to mar the entrance to our community. They have to live here, too. Their plans call for minimal impact of lighting, a tastefully designed entrance, buildings no higher than 30 feet, and a limit on signs. The project would actually not be visible from either highways 99 or 198. It would not be a Selma auto mall.

Some of the criticism of the mall has asserted that it does not comply with the 2020 growth plan and that it promotes leapfrog development.

First, the mall is in keeping with the 2020 growth plan, because it redirects some regional auto dealer business to the edge of the city, where it belongs, and away from the downtown, which ought to expand with different offices, businesses and services -- uses that will make the property more valuable. Auto dealerships are relatively low property values.

The proposed auto mall would be build adjacent to property that is: a freeway, land zoned for a business park, an industrial development and across the street from an airport and hotel. It is not leaping into open space.

#### *Settle the issue*

With the auto mall issue settled, the city can direct its energies to a practical plan for the scenic corridor. But we recognize that yes, time is running out. There is already plenty of non-ag use in the scenic corridor. It is not in the interest of Visalia to hang the hopes of a scenic entrance on one, 73-acre cotton field already impacted by development.

There are always going to be objections to an enterprising project. The community should certainly examine those carefully and weigh the consequences. It will change our community.

It is our conclusion that change will benefit this community. We recommend the City Council approve Visalia Auto Plaza.

## **Cow's main offense to Earth: Breathing**

By Don Curlee

Special to the Visalia Times-Delta

Aug. 18, 2003

Agricultural researchers must wonder sometimes if they're being put on by a gullible and often misinformed public. Consider the group at the University of Nebraska developing methods to improve cows' breath.

It's not the odor, but the content of the exhaled breath that is providing such a profound challenge for this group of scientists. They are looking for a method, perhaps a feed additive, that will reduce the methane gas content of the cows' respiratory output.

By lowering the amount of methane the cows produce they expect to help reduce an important greenhouse gas, thought by many to contribute to global warming. The methane, with carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide trap some of the earth's energy, retaining heat, much the same as the glass panels in a greenhouse.

The increase in the earth's temperature of one degree over the past 100 years is enough to spur these researchers on. They know that the 100 gallons to 150 gallons of methane produced daily by a typical cow amounts to almost 20 percent of that gas released into the atmosphere.

A range livestock nutritionist at Utah State University has shown that the methane gas goes into the cow's blood stream when it is produced in the first of its four stomachs, the rumen. From there it transfers to the respiratory system and is expelled.

Contrary to popular thought, a cow's belch does not increase the amount of escaping methane to any great extent. These researchers, unlike some others, are dealing only with the front end of the cows.

That concentration on the cow's intake end has led to testing more than 200 compounds in the past 18 months aimed at finding a nutritional formula that blocks the methane without harming the beneficial microbes in the cow's rumen.

Ten of those compounds show enough promise to undergo further testing, using rumen fluid extracted from a steer. None of the compounds has been tested in live animals yet.

When they are confident enough to begin testing on live animals the researchers say cattle might not be the ones tested. It might be sheep or something else smaller than cows.

"And before sheep we may go to a termite," one researcher said. "They make a lot of methane."

With all of this concentration the research team expects to reduce the methane emissions from cattle by only about 4 percent, but the scientists believe that is enough to restore some equilibrium to the planet's natural method of getting rid of methane. Methane's lifetime in the atmosphere is 10 to 20 years, while carbon dioxide hangs around for 50 to 200 years.

The outcome is expected to be especially important to the environment in an area such as Tulare County, where dairy cattle outnumber people, and breathing is important to both.

## **'Spare the Air' alert issued**

The Hanford Sentinel

Aug. 17, 2003

FRESNO - Today and Monday are forecast to be "Spare the Air" days in Kings County because of air pollution levels, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Residents can help cut back on air pollution by avoiding unnecessary vehicle use including cars, watercraft and off-road vehicles, according to the district.

Police arrest man on suspicion of rape

VISALIA - A man has been arrested on suspicion of raping a 14-year-old girl, the Visalia Police Department reported.

Police arrested Bert Huntsucker, 42, of Visalia, Friday, on suspicion of rape, according to the department.

The incident took place in June 2003 on the 4600 block of West Paradise Ave., but was not reported until Aug. 7, according to the department.

## **Saturday is another Spare the Air Day**

The Tulare Advance-Register

Aug. 16, 2003

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is asking that Tulare County residents make efforts to spare the air on Saturday. The organization suggests using less gas by linking trips, using electric charcoal starters instead of lighter

fluid and avoiding long periods of idling the car. Those who are sensitive to bad air should avoid strenuous physical activity. Information: [www.valleyair.org](http://www.valleyair.org)  
<<http://www.valleyair.org>>

## **Spare the Air in Merced**

The Modesto Bee

Aug. 16, 2003

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has declared Spare the Air days today and Sunday in Merced County. Officials urge children and adults with breathing problems to limit the amount of time they spend outdoors. Everyone can help reduce pollution by limiting vehicle use, not using gasoline-powered yard and lawn equipment, and forgoing charcoal lighter fluid for barbecues.

## **Farmers working to clean air**

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee

in The Modesto Bee

Aug. 17, 2003

On his 500-acre farm east of Fresno, Keith Nilmeier battles air pollution with peach pits. On his 8,000-acre west Fresno County farm, Ted Sheely's pollution-fighting arsenal features satellite technology.

Simple or complex, big or small, the pollution battle is on.

Growers are discovering ways to combat the cloud of dust following their tractors and other air pollutants in farm country.

Nilmeier's peach pits hold down dust on his dirt roads. Sheely's technology guides his tractors to fewer and more precise passes on his fields, reducing diesel and dust pollution.

Growers such as Nilmeier and Sheely stand on the front lines in agriculture's newest war. Call it Operation Farm Air Cleanup, a campaign that would have seemed surreal five years ago in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Back then, it was believed that air pollution came from cities and freeways, not fields and orchards. Air pollution continues to come mainly from cars, diesel trucks, power plants, construction and other city-related sources, but research suggests farming also plays a significant role.

### *Plenty of pollution sources*

Diesel exhaust, emissions from livestock waste, soot from open-field burning, fumes from pesticides -- whatever wafts into the air from a farm is getting attention from environmentalists, who began pushing for a farm cleanup two years ago.

State estimates show that farm tractors, well pumps and other equipment are responsible for about 25 percent of the smog-producing gases in the valley. Farms contribute about half the particle pollution coming from dust.

Dairies, which have grown larger in the past decade, are a source of tiny wintertime particles. Ammonia from animal waste combines with oxides of nitrogen from combustion sources, such as cars, to form ammonium nitrate particles.

Two years ago, environmentalists placed the farm-related statistics alongside the valley's ranking as one of the country's dirtiest air basins. And they learned that health experts connect air pollution to the valley's mounting respiratory problems.

Environmentalists soon filed lawsuits attacking agriculture's historic state exemption from air operating permits, and won. Their victory meant farmers had to file applications for the permits starting in May.

Several thousand out of the more than 25,000 valley farms applied for the permits because their annual air pollution totals 25 tons or more. Those farmers must account for all the pollution and pay a fee that could run thousands of dollars.

Some might avoid the permit program by changing from diesel pumps and coming up with other ideas to bring their annual pollution total below 25 tons.

The federal government has required the state to take over the monitoring. To do that, the state will have to lift its permit exemption for farmers by November.

Farmers say they see the valley's population swiftly growing and cities expanding over ag land. As the population grows, more cars are covering more miles and adding pollution, and many believe the public does not give them credit for the agriculture industry's positive contributions in the air fight

For instance, more than half of the 4,000 dirty diesel engines on farm water wells have been upgraded in the past few years, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Many farmers also routinely spread water on unpaved roads to minimize dust.

But Sierra Club member Kevin Hall, who helped launch clean-air lawsuits against farming, said it's important to remember that most innovations are motivated by the bottom line.

"They're cutting down on pesticides or diesel to save money," he said. "I'm all for commending them for voluntary efforts. But I think they're setting a standard that should be legally required of all comparably sized farms."

But in an enterprise that has slim profit margins compared with those of many other industries, farming has positive effects on the environment, growers said.

"Think of all the greenery we have and all the dust and carbon dioxide it filters," Nilmeier said.

He uses peach pits from his trees, mashing them down into dirt roads to hold down dust.

In addition, Nilmeier wants to spend \$10,000 on a portable chipper to dispose of his farm waste rather than burning it. He has replaced the diesel engines on two older harvesters. State money paid for 75 percent of the replacements.

Sheely has enlisted global positioning systems and computers.

As one of Sheely's 450-horsepower tractors drags a ripper weighing several tons across a bare field, a \$35,000 guidance unit, hooked to satellite technology, steers. The ripper digs immense teeth deep into the soil to loosen it for the next crop to spread roots.

With no one touching the steering wheel, the tractor miraculously runs straight for hundreds of yards, less than an inch from the path of the ripper's previous pass. No overlap.

"Yes, there is dust," Sheely said. "You can't help it. With precision farming, you make fewer passes and there's less dust."

He also saves money on fuel, tractor maintenance and labor. He spent more than \$100,000 on the technology, which paid for itself in increased efficiency within months, he said.

## **Lawmakers rush to pass bills**

Bee Capitol Bureau

The Modesto Bee

Aug. 18, 2003

SACRAMENTO -- Valley lawmakers are pushing bills on a wide range of topics, from air quality to a tax exemption for veterans organization food sales, as the legislative session enters the home stretch to the governor's desk.

The Assembly and Senate, due back today from summer recess, have less than a month to pass bills and put them on Gov. Davis' desk.

The deadline is Sept. 12, and the governor then has until Oct. 12 to sign legislation or veto it. Then again, he might have only until Oct. 7 -- that date of a special election that could put him out of the Statehouse.

The looming recall vote will complicate what already is sure to be a busy few weeks in the Capitol.

"How does all of that play into the last four weeks of the legislative session? We don't know," said Assemblywoman Sarah Reyes, D-Fresno. "We're going to play it by ear."

Modesto Republican Dave Cogdill is focusing on Assembly Bill 233, which would impose longer prison sentences for certain methamphetamine crimes that occur in places inhabited by any child under 16.

Under existing law, sentences are extended only when a child under 16 happens to be present when the methamphetamine crimes are committed.

"Meth production runs rampant throughout the Central Valley and foothills and has devastating effects on communities, families and especially children," said Cogdill, the bill's author. "Protecting our children from the harmful effects of meth needs to be our top priority in battling this deadly drug."

AB 233 passed the Assembly on a 77-0 vote June 2, and is scheduled for a hearing today in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Cogdill also is pushing AB 189, approved on a 77-0 Assembly vote May 29 and also up for a hearing today in the Senate Appropriations Committee. The bill would grant a sales and use tax exemption for food that nonprofit veterans organizations sell in fund-raising ventures.

He said many other groups such as schools, parents organizations, religious organizations and sports organizations already receive such as exemption, "while veterans organizations do not, even though they deserve it."

Republican Sen. Jeff Denham, whose district stretches from Modesto and Merced to the Salinas Valley, also has a piece of military-related legislation. Under the measure, qualified, active-duty members of the National Guard would pay no fees for undergraduate studies at some universities.

"He feels very strongly about helping the Guardsmen get an education," said Nick Rappley, a spokesman for Denham.

On another front, Denham is listed as a principal co-author of AB 1207, which would authorize "golden handshakes" for teachers in districts that have kindergarten through 12th grade and in community college districts.

The intent is to encourage senior, generally higher-paid teachers to retire, thereby cutting salary expenses in financially strapped school districts.

AB 1207 is back in the Assembly for concurrence in Senate amendments.

Perhaps the most watched legislation from a valley lawmaker is an aggressive package of eight clean-air bills by Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter.

He said he anticipates some opposition, but expects all of his bills to reach Davis' desk for signing.

Florez's Senate Bill 705, which would stop farmers from burning crop waste, has moved the quickest through the Legislature. The measure could be heard on the Assembly floor as early as today.

Five other air quality bills are on the schedule of the Assembly Appropriations Committee this week.

Among them is SB 700, which would repeal the \$27 billion farming industry's historic exemption from clean-air permit requirements. The valley could lose billions of dollars in federal road funding if the exemption is not lifted.

### *Workers comp reform*

Sen. Charles Poochigian, a Fresno Republican whose district stretches into Stanislaus County, is occupied with the state's workers compensation crisis.

He and five other lawmakers, composing a special committee, are scheduled to review 20 bills dealing with the issue, which has led employers statewide to slow hiring and lay off workers.

Three years ago, workers comp premiums cost California employers \$9.1 billion. This year, they are projected at \$20 billion.

Earlier this year, Poochigian held workers compensation hearings in Modesto, Fresno and Bakersfield. The sessions drew some 600 business, government and labor leaders calling for an end to skyrocketing premiums.

In April, Poochigian and other Senate Republicans introduced a 14-bill workers compensation reform package that emphasized medical cost controls, fraud suppression and reduced litigation. Most were defeated in committee.

"The premiums have gone up, in some instances 300 percent to 400 percent," Poochigian said. "It is so wasteful and damaging, not just to business but government, to see dollars go to a system that is inefficient, unfair and out of control."