

Traffic linked to heart risks

Inhaling exhaust can cause illness, air board told.

By Jennifer M. Fitzenberger / Bee Capitol Bureau

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SACRAMENTO — Sitting in traffic could break your heart.

Recent studies link time spent in traffic to an increased risk for heart disease and heart attacks — even in young, healthy adults, according to information presented Thursday to the California Air Resources Board.

Researchers say inhaling exhaust filled with tiny specks of chemicals and soot could lead to heart problems. The increased risk, they say, also applies to bus riders, motorcyclists and bicyclists.

"There's something in traffic that, particularly for susceptible individuals, can cause heart problems," said Dr. Henry Gong, a respiratory specialist who serves on the state board. "I think it's only the tip of the iceberg."

For years, studies have linked pollution in exhaust to health problems. Board members have used the research to set air-quality standards. Diesel exhaust is a major source of air pollution, which can cause lung cancer, respiratory-tract infections, asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Lung disease is a leading cause of death in America, killing nearly 350,000 people each year.

Newer research brings heart problems related to traffic into the mix.

In one study, German researchers interviewed about 700 people who survived heart attacks between February 1999 and July 2001. Exposure to traffic, they found, was most frequent one hour before the person suffered a heart attack.

Researchers didn't measure air pollution, but they concluded it is one of several factors that could cause heart attacks. Other factors include stress and loud noise.

Another study followed nine healthy North Carolina state troopers in the fall of 2001. Researchers measured levels of particulate matter — tiny specks of pollution — inside the troopers' vehicles, on the side of the road and in the community.

The study linked in-vehicle pollution with changes in the blood and heart that created an increased risk for heart disease.

"An important question is how these effects translate to the California environment, where traffic pollution is typically high and commutes are relatively long," said Dr. Norman Kato, a member of the air board's staff.

Last month, the board authorized a study that will examine the cardiovascular effects of exposure to specks of pollution during freeway travel.

Beginning this summer or fall, researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles, will track 16 healthy people older than 50 during freeway commutes. The subjects will undergo health tests and blood analysis.

Results are expected in 21/2 years.

Traffic in the San Joaquin Valley — which harbors some of the dirtiest air in the nation — isn't as bad as in Los Angeles, but the freeways are getting busier.

In 1980, when about 2 million people lived in the Valley, vehicles traveled about 34 million miles per day on Valley roads. Today, vehicles travel more than 90 million miles each day in the Valley, now home to about 3.5 million people.

"That's expected to grow as our population increases," said Kelly Malay, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

To minimize the health effects of traffic pollution, Malay suggests finding ways to reduce the amount of time spent in cars, such as planning errands in advance.

She also suggests investing in cleaner technology such as hybrid cars. Said Malay: "There are small changes that we all can make that won't bankrupt us and that we can fit into our lives with a little bit of effort."

South Bay to test pollution-free hydrogen cell buses

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When several new high-tech buses hit the streets of the South Bay on Monday, the emissions that spew from their tailpipes will be clean enough to pour into a glass and drink.

The buses are part of a joint \$18.5 million program of SamTrans and the Santa Clara County Valley Transportation Authority to explore the feasibility of vehicles powered by hydrogen fuel cells, a technology that ultimately may replace gasoline powered cars and buses on the nation's roads.

The buses use a cutting-edge, electrochemical engine that combines hydrogen fuel and oxygen to produce electricity. The only byproducts of the process are heat and water, meaning the buses are essentially pollution-free.

"As with other zero-emission programs in the Bay Area and throughout California, the goal of our partnership and this program is to bring hydrogen-based, zero-emission technology closer to using an already abundant element, hydrogen, to power our industry," said SamTrans board member and San Mateo County Supervisor Jerry Hill.

The program amounts to a large-scale test drive. SamTrans officials want to see how well the fuel-cell buses run, how expensive they will be to operate and how much it will cost to keep their tanks topped off.

"This is one of (12) projects worldwide using this technology, so there are a lot of questions that need to be answered," said Jayme Maltbie Kunz, a SamTrans spokeswoman.

The tests largely will determine whether fuel-cell buses become a staple of the SamTrans fleet when the California Air Resources Board enacts stricter pollution regulations in 2009.

SamTrans and the VTA have put up \$6 million each for the program. The state and federal government are providing the balance of the funding for the project.

The buses will go into service on Monday on VTA Routes 45 in San Jose and 47 in Milpitas.

Fuel cells may sound like something out of Jules Verne, but President Bush is banking on the technology as a way to wean the United States from its dependence on foreign oil.

In his 2003 State of the Union address, Bush unveiled an initiative to commit \$1.7 billion to fuel-cell research over the next five years. A handful of states from Hawaii to Connecticut have also undertaken fuel-cell initiatives that mirror Bush's proposal.

In addition to being pollution free, proponents say fuel cells are more energy-efficient than gasoline engines, quieter, and the fuel will eventually be cheaper than conventional fuels. By 2010, the U.S. Department of Energy hopes to be able to provide fuel for the equivalent of a \$1.50 a gallon.

But industry experts say there is still a long way to go before fuel-cell vehicles are seen widely on the nation's roads. The technology is still not cheap or reliable enough for widespread use, and the nation would have to develop a system of hydrogen filling stations.

Some environmentalists, including the Sierra Club, have criticized Bush's plan. saying fuel-cell cars won't be widely available for another 20 years, and Bush has done little to address vehicle pollution in the meantime.

Selma group sues to bar Wal-Mart supercenter

By Donald E. Coleman / The Fresno Bee

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A lawsuit has been filed seeking to overturn approval of the first Wal-Mart supercenter in Fresno County.

The lawsuit against the nation's largest retailer and the city of Selma was filed Feb. 18 in Fresno County Superior Court. The Selma City Council last month unanimously approved a 203,000-square-foot store.

A Wal-Mart spokesman said the lawsuit and others similar to it are trying to limit competition and will have no effect on the company's plans to open 40 supercenters in California by 2008.

"It's an effort to use [the law] by those who want to promote their own agendas — organized labor and the grocery stores," said Peter Kanelos, regional director of community affairs for Wal-Mart. "They want to limit competition to protect their market share."

Brett S. Jolley, a lawyer representing the Save Our Selma Coalition, which filed the lawsuit, said: "It's unfortunate that developers and Wal-Mart in particular would like to ignore the California Environmental Quality Act." Jolley said the council approved the project even though it is inconsistent with the city's general plan and zoning laws.

Jolley said the general plan states that the minimum standard for commercial property is 5 acres. However, he said, most of the lots for commercial development are 1 to 2 acres.

"Twelve of the 13 lots are too small," Jolley said. "The city didn't answer that at the meeting, and we still haven't heard from them on this."

Neal Costanzo, Selma's lawyer, could not be reached to comment. Selma City Manager D-B Heusser said the city had no comment.

More than 200 people showed up at Selma City Hall in January, some to support the proposed grocery/retail outlet on Floral Avenue off Highway 99, others to oppose it. When the meeting ended in the wee hours, the council had voted 4-0 to approve the supercenter.

Newly elected Council Member Jim Avalos abstained because he works for Save Mart.

"It is our belief that the city of Selma did a very good job of addressing all the issues and concerns in the EIR raised by the project's opponents," said Timothy Jones, a lawyer representing Wal-Mart.

No so, according to Jolley and the Save Our Selma Coalition, a group of residents and merchants fighting the effort to build the supercenter across from an existing Wal-Mart.

The lawsuit alleges the City Council received an environmental impact report that contained inaccuracies. The lawsuit said the report described the project as being 400,000 square feet — 225,000 for a supercenter — but the site plan identified only 203,081 square feet of retail development.

The lawsuit said the city did not fully evaluate the potential for urban decay, energy impacts, air quality and traffic impacts.

Wal-Mart developed the supercenter concept in 1988. The stores typically exceed 200,000 square feet and carry everything from lettuce to shoes at prices lower than those of many other retailers. The idea of the discount retailer competing with local grocery stores, many of which offer higher-paying jobs, has many people on edge in communities nationwide.

Jones said he expected the lawsuit. The company has been hit with several in the state while attempting to expand.

In Hanford, litigation is pending after the city council there approved a supercenter. Another hearing is scheduled for March 11.

Litigation also is taking place after a Wal-Mart with a grocery store component was approved in Clovis.

Jolley said a hearing will be set to determine whether a court will set aside the council's approval until environmental and planning and zoning laws are followed.

Kanelos said the company still plans to open 40 new supercenters.

[Modesto Bee editorial, Friday, Feb. 25, 2005:](#)

Killing Amtrak would be foolish

President Bush failed to starve Amtrak during his first term, but he is back with a proposal in his 2006 budget to cut all funding for the nation's passenger rail service. That would be a mistake.

Railroads, including passenger rail, are vital components of the nation's transportation system. They are part of the network that creates a vibrant economy. Highways, airports and seaports receive federal support. The country's rail network needs federal investment, too.

Starving Amtrak to death is incredibly shortsighted. Amtrak operates the state's extensive network of intercity rail systems under contract with regional rail authorities. In California, passenger rail service is growing in popularity; the Bush cuts would put it at risk.

Amtrak serves about 750,000 passengers a year on its San Joaquin trains, which run between Oakland or Sacramento and Bakersfield, with bus connections to Los Angeles. The service reaches communities that have limited or no air service and helps reduce air pollution.

Because Amtrak is the only entity in the country that, by statute, has unlimited access to tracks owned by private freight railway companies, its survival is critical to intercity passenger service. Congress negotiated Amtrak's special status 34 years ago. In exchange, private railroads were allowed to ditch money-draining passenger operations.

The Bush proposal jeopardizes that arrangement. While intercity service might find a way to survive, the long-distance interstate trains, already struggling due to the administration's parsimony, would wither and die.

The one positive idea in the Bush budget proposal would create a 50-50 federal-state funding match for rail investment - but even that has intolerable strings attached. The federal share of the money would come only after the government yanked all of its support from Amtrak - which, in the end, would leave states such as California with less, not more, to spend on passenger rail.

The Bush budget proposal is the opening salvo in a debate expected to take months. Congress has defied the administration and appropriated funds to support passenger rail in the past. It should do so again.