

Saturday, trade gas mower for electric

Staff report

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, May 11, 2005

Trade your gas-guzzling mower for a new electric mower Saturday at the annual "Clean Green Yard Machines" sale at The Home Depot, 1617 N. Carpenter Road, Modesto.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is giving \$130 discounts on electric mowers regularly priced at \$230. You pay \$100 plus tax for a new Black & Decker MM875. Limited to 240 mowers. First-come, first-served; 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

For more information, contact Anthony Presto, 557-6472, or anthony.presto@valleyair.org.

Transportation alternatives focus of event

Week promotes virtues of leaving your car at home

By Percy Ednalino, staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Wednesday, May 11, 2005

Visalians who normally use their own cars to get to work will be asked next week to consider other forms of transportation.

The city has designated May 16-20 as "Dare to Spare" week. It's a way to promote clean air, carpools and use of the Visalia City Coach system. Monty Cox, the city's transit manager, said various local businesses - such as California Water Service Company, Kaweah Delta Health Care District and Family HealthCare Network - have already agreed to participate in the event.

"I think everybody really wants to do what they can to improve air quality and reduce traffic congestion," Cox said. "This is just an opportunity we're taking ... to help people remind them of the way they can do it and help them focus one time to see if they can think of ways they can do better."

Brenda Turner, a spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said it's tough to get people to become more conscious about using alternative modes of transportation. She also said air pollution in the Valley could be reduced by 20 percent if residents chose to car pool or take public transportation to work once a week. (Note: Said that this would reduce the individual's miles driven to work by up to 20 percent, which would be a significant reduction in pollution.)

"That would be a significant reduction," she said.

Visalia City Councilman Walter Deissler is among those who said they intend to participate during the week.

"I'm probably going to ride my bicycle on one of the days," he said. "Hopefully, I don't have to go out of town. But if I'm in Visalia, I'll take my bike."

On Monday, residents are encouraged to car or van pool during Rideshare Day.

Commuters can call a telephone number, (866) 808-7433, to participate in car or van pools anywhere in Tulare and Kings counties. Cox said that number matches callers to one another through a database.

"It will match them up with anybody else that's in the database going the same direction at the same time," he said.

Cox said the service is free.

Driver Appreciation Day is Tuesday. Cox said Visalia City Coach drivers and other employees will be honored. Passengers also are asked to thank their drivers during the day.

Fare for Visalia City Coach buses is 75 cents per trip. A day pass costs \$1.50 and allows unlimited rides all day. A monthly pass costs \$28.

Seniors age 60 and over can ride Visalia City Coach buses free on Wednesday. Cox said about a third of all the guests at last year's Senior Day event used public transportation to get to Mooney Grove Park. Around 1,000 seniors attended last year's event.

"It was a big impact on all the bus services countywide," Cox said.

Bicyclists will receive free rides on Visalia City Coach buses on Thursday, which has been designated Bike to Work Day. On that day, all city buses will be equipped with bicycle racks. Riders who bring their bikes or helmets will be allowed to ride free.

Cox said the transportation department has worked with the city's waterways and trails committee to promote the day.

Deissler said he also plans to try the buses' bike racks.

All Visalia City Coach passengers ride for free on Friday, which is Dare to Spare Day.

A celebration will be held 11 a.m. at the city's Transit Center. Cox said the companies that agreed to participate during the week will be honored. Raffles and giveaways also will be held. Gift certificates and bicycles are among the prizes that are available.

Experts discuss ways to cope with explosive growth

By Eric Stern

The Modesto Bee

May 12, 2005

SACRAMENTO -- Although some elementary school students might disagree, the state flower is no longer the California poppy, according to Dr. Richard Joseph Jackson.

Instead, it's a clover-leaf highway interchange, joked Jackson, the state's top public health official.

And so began the eighth annual Great Valley Center conference Wednesday. The Modesto-based policy center brought 600 local officials and activists to Sacramento to discuss the Valley's booming population and its effect on issues such as air quality, farmland preservation and housing.

By 2040, the Valley population is expected to nearly double to 11.7 million people -- more people that live in New York City.

"The growth is kind of mindboggling," said Ruth Coleman, the state parks director. "We've all seen parts of the Valley paved over."

As part of the two-day seminar, which continues today, Coleman laid out a 20-year blueprint to expand state parks throughout the Central Valley.

"We are looking to the public to tell us what they think are the treasures of the Central Valley," she said. "What are the places you care about? What do you want to save? ... We still have a chance to do things right."

She's been gathering community input in a series of town hall meetings -- one is planned for Modesto in the fall -- to make a wish list of park projects.

With the state's budget crisis, there's no money to buy land. But Coleman wants to get a head start on an anticipated ballot initiative that could raise billions of dollars for park projects.

Similar bond issues in 2000 and 2002 mostly funded projects along the coast and in urban areas. The Central Valley largely was left out because of prearranged rules on how to dole out the money.

The next time around, the Central Valley needs to be ready, she said.

A misconception among policy-makers is that there's plenty of open space in the Central Valley because of the abundance of farms, she said, adding that "kids don't get to play soccer on tomato fields."

The plan doesn't focus on acquiring large, flat agricultural expanses -- too hot in the summer and too foggy in the winter, Coleman said.

Instead, the parks department is looking at expanding corridors on the Sacramento, Tuolumne, Stanislaus, San Joaquin and Merced rivers for recreational opportunities.

The plan also calls for setting aside blue oak and sycamore woodland and native grassland, building agriculture and Native American museums, preserving prehistoric rock art and developing Highway 99 into a heritage route.

Most of the 278 state parks hug the coastline, Coleman said. Only 32 -- or 7 percent -- are in the Central Valley, which includes a cluster of historical sites in Sacramento.

"Is this all we should have in the Central Valley?" she asks. "Is 7 percent OK? Is that what we want given what's happening in the Central Valley?"

Highway money may speed work

By Adam Ashton
Merced Sun-Star
05-12-05

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger intends to fund a 3-year-old transportation initiative that could clear some of Merced County's backlog of road improvement projects.

Schwarzenegger said Wednesday he will seek \$1.3 billion in funding for local transportation through Proposition 42, a 2002 measure that dedicates gas sales taxes for road projects.

If approved by the state Legislature, Prop. 42 funding would send more than \$45 million to Merced County to build a new highway interchange at Mission Avenue in Merced.

Local officials are courting a distribution center that could employ more than 1,000 people near that planned interchange. They have said the deal would fall through without the road improvement.

"We can go after that distribution center and get those jobs in Merced County," said Mike Peterson, general manager of Merced's Safeway grocery plant and a member of the county's One Voice Committee, which lobbies for government funding in the area.

Schwarzenegger and the Legislature held off on allocating Proposition 42 funds because of the statewide budget crisis that helped drive former Gov. Gray Davis from office.

Merced County Supervisor Deidre Kelsey said she counted on that money for needed roadwork in her district, which stretches around the county's northern end.

"It's been very frustrating as a local official to anticipate the passage of Prop. 42 and then see the dollars diverted to the state," she said, ticking off Bloss Avenue in Hilmar, Hunt Road in Gustine and county roads in Winton as areas she'd like to see upgraded.

Jesse Brown, director of the Merced County Association of Governments, said work could begin on the Mission Interchange this fall if the money comes through on time. He said that interchange would open up other projects, including a parkway linking Highway 99 to the new University of California, Merced.

MCAG's plans for the future of local transportation have advanced this spring with the Board of Supervisors and four city councils signing off on a proposal to charge developers one-time fees to help pay for road improvements. The fees would be about \$1,365 for a residential home, with higher rates for other types of construction.

Brown said MCAG could begin collecting that fee, projected to bring in \$91 million over 20 years, this July.

MCAG also intends to put a sales tax measure on the 2006 ballot to raise \$267 million over 20 years for transportation projects.

Preserving valley treasure

By ERIC STERN, BEE CAPITOL BUREAU
Modesto Bee, Thursday, May 12, 2005

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Central Valley left out last time

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On the Net: www.greatvalley.org <<http://www.greatvalley.org>>.

Health worries for east county

Naturally occurring asbestos found in developments' paths.

By Chris Bowman -- Bee Staff Writer

Sacramento Bee, Thursday, May 12, 2005

Miles-long belts of asbestos-bearing rock lie in the path of major residential developments planned by the city of Folsom and GenCorp in eastern Sacramento County, a regional air pollution official said at a state Senate hearing Wednesday.

The news from Larry Greene, executive officer of the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District, significantly expands the area of concern where construction can churn up naturally occurring asbestos and create a potential health hazard.

While developing communities uphill of Folsom have struggled with asbestos for years, it was only last year that the fibrous minerals were discovered in Folsom, at a site planned for a high school and the nearby Empire Ranch housing development.

The asbestos find at the proposed Lago Vista High School led air district regulators to investigate where else development in fast-growing eastern Sacramento County might encounter asbestos.

State geologists said the areas likely to contain the minerals cover nearly all of Folsom and a large swath of undeveloped land south of Highway 50 to Rancho Murieta.

"Now we have a larger area to be concerned with," Greene said in testimony before a joint hearing of the Senate committees on health and environmental quality.

The heads of the committees, Sens. Deborah Ortiz, D-Sacramento, and Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, respectively, called the informational hearing to learn whether government is doing enough to protect foothills residents from asbestos exposure.

The four-hour hearing drew testimony from foothills residents and federal, state and local officials. Regulators outlined the safeguards they have taken, while foothills residents criticized them for not doing enough.

The hearing was tied to an Ortiz bill, SB 655, that would have a team of state health and environmental specialists develop ways to assess and minimize residents' risks of asbestos-related disease.

The worrisome geologic formations underlie more than 3,500 acres of land that developers have bought in anticipation of Folsom annexing the land and Sacramento County expanding its urban growth boundary.

The developers include GenCorp, the parent of the rocket manufacturer Aerojet in Rancho Cordova. The company's Easton Project would put houses, offices and retail outlets on land straddling Folsom and Rancho Cordova.

Farthest along is Elliot Homes' proposed 11,500-home Rio del Oro community on what used to be part of the defense contractor's sprawling compound.

The suspect areas are in formations known by geologists as the Copper Hill Volcanics and Gopher Ridge Belt of the Sierra Nevada foothills, Greene said.

The rock is similar to that identified in western El Dorado County and elsewhere in the Sierra foothills and Coast Ranges as hosting asbestos.

"It's not a surprise now that we think about it," Greene said Wednesday after the hearing.

The air district's governing board, comprising county and city officials, recently approved a \$50,000 contract with the California Geological Survey to create a map of the area that better defines where asbestos would likely be found.

As part of the mapping effort, the air district will commission geologists and laboratories to analyze soil samples to test for asbestos.

Some developers already have found asbestos veins on planned building sites, according to David Sederquist, a geologist who consults for developers.

Speaking at the annual conference of the Geological Society of America in San Jose last month, Sederquist said he and other geologists have been in the field evaluating the areas under question since early 2003.

Sederquist said they discovered several veins of a particularly potent form of asbestos called amphibole, which is also found in El Dorado Hills.

But he said the asbestos is harder to find than it is uphill in western El Dorado County because the landscape doesn't bear the telltale outcrops of serpentine and other asbestos-containing rock.

The joint Senate committee hearing followed the release of two federal asbestos studies finding that students and staff at Oak Ridge High School likely breathed the minerals' hazardous fibers in years past and that people playing across the street at the community's busiest park continue to be exposed.

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) released a study Friday that said the high school is no longer exposed to elevated levels of asbestos since bare grounds were paved or landscaped last summer.

The agency warned that some who attended the school before the asbestos-containment work face an increased risk of developing asbestos-related disease later in life.

Student athletes, coaches and grounds maintenance staff likely experienced the greatest exposures, according to the findings, which The Bee reported last month. The agency based its conclusions largely on EPA tests that found high asbestos levels in the soil and air at baseball diamonds, the running track and other areas of campus.

On Wednesday, John Wheeler, an ATSDR toxicologist, said at the hearing that the agency is considering setting up medical screening for Oak Ridge graduates and staff who think they may have been exposed. The agency also may solicit construction workers who have been working in asbestos soil for the past 10 or more years, he said.

Such health evaluations would include X-rays to look for signs of asbestos-related diseases on the lungs.

Omnitrans backs ruling for clean-burning fleets

By Stephen Wall

Staff Writer

Los Angeles Daily News

Monday, May 09, 2005

The county's public transit agency Monday lauded a federal court ruling that requires buses, street sweepers and other fleet vehicles to use cleaner engines.

U.S. District Court Judge Florence-Marie Cooper's decision Friday allows the South Coast Air Quality Management District to require that fleet operators buy the cleanest-burning vehicles available. The district court is in Los Angeles.

Omnitrans officials said the ruling reinforces the agency's commitment to cleaner air.

"It's part of the Omnitrans mission to operate in an environmentally sensitive manner and that means the use of low-emission vehicles in our fleet," Omnitrans spokeswoman Wendy Williams said. "We've long been a part of improving local air quality."

Williams said Omnitrans began converting to compressed natural gas vehicles in 1997. The AQMD adopted clean-fleet rules in 2000 and 2001.

Omnitrans also introduced electric-gasoline hybrid technology for transit buses in November 2003, Williams said.

By the end of the year, she said, about 95 percent of Omnitrans buses will use clean fuel. Very few diesel-powered vehicles are left in the fleet, Williams said.

AQMD's clean-fleet rules include seven measures requiring transit buses, school buses, trash trucks, airport shuttles and taxis, street sweepers and heavy-duty utility trucks to buy clean-fueled models when they replace vehicles or add to their fleets of 15 or more vehicles.

As a result of the rules, more than 5,500 clean-burning heavy-duty vehicles, powered by natural gas and other clean fuels, have been added to fleets in Southern California, according to the AQMD.

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that federal clean-air law bars local agencies from having stronger standards. The Bush administration supported the ruling.

At the time, AQMD officials said the court left open the door for local rules to be established regarding leased and used fleet vehicles and publicly owned vehicles.

Cooper's decision affirmed the right of AQMD to move forward with its clean-fleet rules and further reduce toxic diesel emissions.

AQMD spokesman Sam Atwood said the fleet rules, while important, "are one piece of a very large puzzle."

"Although we've just had the cleanest year on record for ozone and particulate pollution, we have a long way to go before we reach our goal of healthful air," Atwood said.

AQMD is pushing three bills in the state Legislature that would reduce air pollution from rail yard operations, mitigate the impact of railroad locomotive emissions and facilitate the detection and reporting of highly polluting locomotives.

"If the bills are signed into law, it would mean an improvement in air quality for residents in the Inland Empire and particularly neighborhoods in San Bernardino and Colton that are immediately adjacent to the rail yards," Atwood said.

The Colton City Council on April 5 passed a resolution supporting Assembly Bill 1222, Assembly Bill 888 and Senate Bill 459.

"We are highly impacted with the railway that runs right through Colton," Councilman John Mitchell said. "We're asking them to use existing technology that will clean the air for our residents. I don't think we're asking for anything out of the ordinary."

Atwood said the AQMD's efforts also are focused on reducing air pollution at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

"While it may seem a long way from San Bernardino, because of prevailing winds, a lot of emissions from the ports are blowing inland," Atwood said.

He said the Crestline and Lake Arrowhead areas last year exceeded the federal health standard for ozone levels.

Metrolink's weekday rider stats at record High gas prices may drive more to take train instead

By Lisa Mascaro

Wednesday, May 11, 2005

Metrolink saw its weekday ridership spike by 1,000 boardings last month to a record 41,000, a gain attributed to rising gas prices and the opening of a Palmdale station, officials said Tuesday.

Officials believe that some motorists opted to take the train after gas prices topped \$2.50 a gallon.

"We're guessing it's sticker shock, the jump at the pump," said Metrolink spokeswoman Denise Tyrrell. "We're happy to have them there, and we're hoping we can lure them into a lifetime of being off the freeway (for) their commute."

Some of the increase also may have come from opening Palmdale's first station at the end of April.

Typically, Metrolink's average boardings each weekday have peaked at just under 40,000, Tyrrell said.

Most transit agencies count passengers each time they board the trains.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority also had a ridership spike on most of its trains for the first three months of the year, over last year's numbers, though its bus ridership remained flat, a spokesman said.

Ridership jumped the most on the Metro Red Line subway, which grew by nearly 12 percent to 117,500 boardings each weekday, over the first quarter of 2004.

The Metro Blue Line and Green Line also saw increased boardings, but the Gold Line had a decline -- though it was hit by closures during the rains.

However, Tyrrell at Metrolink said the agency will be watching to see if the gains hold as gas prices fall.

Although train tickets tend to be cheaper than car ownership -- even with Metrolink's fare increases coming this summer -- the agency finds return customers are those who board because they want an alternative to driving.

"If the only reason the individual chooses to commute by train is a financial one, that usually is short-lived," she said. "It's a lifestyle choice. ... They're choosing to take back that commute time for themselves."

Vacaville

Official to be honored for work on clean air

by Erin Hallissy, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Thursday, May 12, 2005

The city's transportation system manager, who has promoted alternative fuel cars, will receive an honorable mention from the American Lung Association today at the 2005 Clean Air Awards Luncheon in San Francisco.

Ed Huestis has coordinated a program to provide financial incentives of up to \$4,500 to residents of Vacaville, Dixon and Rio Vista who buy vehicles powered by compressed natural gas.

He also coordinated a program that leased electric vehicles to residents of Vacaville, which has the highest number of electric vehicles per capita of any city in the country.

The awards luncheon, featuring a keynote address by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., will be at the World Trade Club in San Francisco.

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Thursday May 11, 2005](#)

Time is right for high-speed rail in California

By FRAN FLOREZ, Shafter

The California High Speed Rail Authority is nearing completion of an environmental planning document for the development of a high-speed rail system for California similar to that already operating in almost every industrialized country in the world.

The draft EIR/EIS found that a high-speed rail system would be environmentally preferable to expanding the state's highways and airports to meet the needs of more than an additional 11 million Californians expected to reside in California by 2020.

The 700-mile initial route spans from San Francisco through the Central Valley to Los Angeles. The trains travel at speeds up to 220 miles per hour and link the Central Valley to California's major cities along the route, with ridership projections of at least 68 million Californians per year by 2020.

In November 2006, the people of California will have the opportunity to vote on a bond authorization for this system, thereby deciding if California should continue its current approach or go in a new direction.

The bond measure has already been postponed from 2004 to 2006. There are some who would rather delay this vote until 2008 risking, making the planning document obsolete.

While many legislative supporters of the plan are hesitant to place another major bond measure on the ballot, the need for high-speed rail continues to grow. This is one decision that Californians can't afford to delay.

Lawmakers are considering putting another major bond issue on the ballot in March asking voters to fund improvement of freeways and other traditional transportation systems and are hesitant to have two transportation bond measures placed before the voters in a short time span.

It seems that this thinking is ignoring the opportunity to make strides for the future. California needs the high-speed rail system that will get more travelers off congested highways and roads.

Over the years, California has developed an elaborate transportation infrastructure, including freeways, airports and several regional rail and other mass transportation systems often connected to each other more by chance than by design.

With high-speed trains, Californians have the opportunity to integrate this system in order to avoid the state's transportation falling into even greater chaos.

High-speed rail will increase connectivity, opening vast opportunities for business and leisure that are currently non-existent. Additionally, high-speed trains offer significant environmental benefits; using less land than is needed for highways, reducing air pollutant emissions and improving air quality.

Building the system also improves existing rail corridors by providing grade separations. This would improve the safety and reliability and efficiency of freight services. Quickly moving goods out of the Central Valley will now be a possibility.

The time is right for bringing high-speed rail to California. Let's not postpone the ballot measure once again. Give the citizens the ability to make a decision about the future of transportation in our state. It is only fair, as they must deal with the impacts of a living with a failing system every day.

Fran Florez is vice chair of the California High Speed Rail Authority and mayor of Shafter.
Community Voices is an expanded commentary that may contain up to 500 words.