

Fresno Co. wood-burning ban issued

By Barbara Anderson

Fresno Bee, Friday, Nov. 18, 2005

Don't put a log on the fireplace or in the wood stove today.

Air-quality officials announced late Thursday the first wood-burning ban of the season. Wood burning is prohibited through midnight tonight. And people should check the status of wood burning for Saturday before lighting a fire.

Air-quality officials issued the mandatory burn ban for Fresno County after forecasters said the air quality should deteriorate to 152 on the Air Quality Index today. Air at levels between 151 and 200 AQI is unhealthy for the general public.

A halt to burning in mid-November should come as little surprise.

Stagnant air routinely settles over the central San Joaquin Valley this time of year, trapping tiny soot particles close to the ground.

In 2003, the first no-burn day of the year came Nov. 18. Last year, it arrived Nov. 20 in Kern County. Shortly thereafter, air officials curtailed burning in Fresno County on Dec. 3 and 4, the only two no-burn days of the season.

The "Check Before You Burn" program runs Nov. 1 through Feb. 28. Burning wood on a no-burn day can result in fines.

Weather forecasts for the next few days aren't encouraging for wood burning. "Things are going to stay very stagnant once again," said Mark Burger, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Hanford.

The prohibition against wood burning is to protect public health, said Kelly Hogan Malay, spokeswoman at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"The air pollution we're talking about is a serious health threat. This is not just about being able to see the mountains; this is a matter of health for people in the Valley," she said.

Particles in the air can cause asthma attacks and have been linked to heart disease and other health problems. The airborne particles include road dust, diesel soot, ash, wood smoke, nitrates and sulfates.

"Breathing even moderate amounts of small airborne particles can cause sudden and severe asthma episodes and infection for those already suffering from lung diseases," said Josette Merced Bello, chief executive officer at the American Lung Association of Central California.

"But because these particles can get into the bloodstream, high amounts of particulates this week are a health risk for everyone," Merced Bello said.

The burn ban does not include devices that use natural gas or propane exclusively; homes that don't have connections to natural gas; homes at elevations of 3,000 feet or higher; homes with no other heating device where wood burning is the sole source of heat; and cooking devices.

"It's as important as ever to reduce the emissions," Malay said. "We just really want to reiterate this is about human health."

Agency invests in future of liquid gas

San Joaquin Valley air district, firms to cut down on pollutants, help haulers

By SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Nov. 18, 2005

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is giving a \$2.3 million boost to the liquid natural gas market in California.

New natural gas engines produce about half as many smog-forming nitrogen oxides as new diesel engines, according to the air district. They also release fewer microscopic particles than diesel trucks.

The technology has slowly crept into public fleets at Golden Empire Transit, the city Bakersfield and Kern County Superintendent of Schools, among other local agencies. Most use the fuel in its vapor form, known as compressed natural gas.

The new venture would produce liquid natural gas, which is now imported from Arizona or Wyoming. Liquid natural gas packs more energy than its gaseous counterpart, and in 18 months, it will be made and distributed in the Central Valley.

"It would be a big help," said Raul Rojas, public works director for the city of Bakersfield, which installed a liquid natural gas fueling station to power garbage trucks.

Liquid natural gas is a better choice for haulers because it takes up less space than compressed natural gas, Rojas said. Having a local source of liquid natural gas makes it a more reliable fuel and cuts down on trucking costs, which can reach 40 cents for an amount of liquid natural gas that packs as much energy as a gallon of diesel, according to the air district.

The liquid natural gas plant, which will be the size of a cargo container and produce more than 30,000 gallons of liquid natural gas per day, will sell its fuel at cost. The project is a public-private partnership, and here are the players:

- Beef-king Harris Farms, which uses liquid natural gas on its feedlot, donated the land near Coalinga.
- Southwest Transportation Agency, which runs Fresno-area school buses, will own the plant.
- U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory will design and engineer it.
- Hanover Compressor Company, a publicly-traded worldwide energy company, will operate it.
- Pacific Gas & Electric Company will provide the fuel.
- The air district pays \$200,000 for engineering work and \$2.3 million to build it.

The money comes from a state traffic congestion relief program.

On Thursday, air district board members spent more than an hour debating whether the district should spend millions on a fuel that could someday yield untold profits for private industry.

"I want to do this," said Mike Maggard, a member of the air board and Bakersfield's City Council.

"(But) in the event it becomes a killer deal with tons of revenue, I'd hate to leave that money on the table for the taxpayers."

Board members wondered if a nonprofit fuel plant would deter for-profit companies from entering the market. The board voted unanimously to fund the project without being paid back.

A cheaper, more reliable supply of liquid natural gas will save the air from 1,640 tons of smog-forming nitrogen oxides and 180 tons of dust particles over five years, according to district figures.

The number of liquid natural gas vehicles in the U.S. has grown by an average of 20 percent per year between 1995 and 2004, according to PG&E.

Like anyone's PG&E bill, the price of natural gas fluctuates.

In the past it's been cheaper than diesel, though a recent spike in the price of natural gas has made the two fuels competitive, according to the district.

Valley air-control district proposes new rules

By SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Nov. 18, 2005

If you drink wine, build homes or operate a commercial dehydrator, take note. On Thursday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District released six proposed rules governing new construction, winemaking, boilers, heaters, ovens and other potential air polluters. They're all scheduled for discussion and possible votes Dec. 15.

Here's a rundown of the issues:

New construction

The rules: The district is considering a set of two rules meant to cut dust and diesel emissions from new development in half, and smog-forming nitrogen oxides by a third. Builders will have to pay for pollution they can't cut by adding bike lanes, clustering homes near shopping centers, planting native plants or finding other air-friendly concession. The idea, mandated by state law, is that more development means more car trips, truck deliveries and leaf-blower use. Taken together, they create pollution.

If the rules are adopted, the district expects to assess 1,200 projects per year and take in \$103 million in fees during the first three years. That money would pay for cleaner-burning engines and other technology to offset pollution from development.

Who cares: A coalition of builders, elected officials and trade groups say the rules overestimate pollution generated by new development. It taxes new homes and businesses without saying exactly how the district will use the money to clean the air, and in five years the rules will generate \$670 million from developers, according to the coalition. The local Sierra Club wants builders to pay for increased pollution from new development, and argues the rule will cut into builders' profits, not taxpayers' pocketbooks.

Winemaking

The rule: In a glass, ethanol gets you drunk. In the air, it wafts from fermenting wine to form smog. The new rule would require the valley's 18 largest wineries, which produce 95 percent of the region's wine, to slash emissions by 35 percent. The rule would cut into wineries' profits by 2.6 percent, according to the district.

Who cares: Winemakers, who say the rule is too expensive and could harm the quality of wine produced.

Boilers, steam generators and process heaters

The rule: To cut down on smog-forming nitrogen oxides and carbon monoxide, this rule would require owners to retrofit this equipment or prove they don't bust pollution limits.

Who cares: This rule affects a range of businesses, including food-processing plants, printers, oil refiners, hotels, restaurants, hospitals and agricultural warehouses, among others.

Dryers, dehydrators and ovens

The rule: This equipment must be brought up to standard or retired, according to this proposed rule, which is aimed at smog-forming nitrogen oxides and carbon monoxide.

Who cares: Fruit and nut processors, concrete plants, milk and dairy businesses and others.

Stationary sources

The rule: A rule that governs oil fields, factories and other stationary sources of air pollution is being updated to include new methods for calculating emissions, among other details.

UC Merced, Great Valley Center team for projects

Partnership combines Valley network with university's research abilities

By Rosalio Ahumada

Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Nov. 18, 2005

MODESTO -- A Central Valley advocacy organization and the University of California, Merced, announced a strategic partnership Thursday in hopes of gaining leverage on regional issues.

The Great Valley Center, a Modesto-based nonprofit, is combining its networks of community leaders, nonprofits and businesses with the research capabilities of UC Merced's faculty and students to tackle issues affecting counties in the Central Valley.

The advocacy center is also hoping UC Merced's name recognition and optimistic future will reverse the center's current fortunes and stop a decline in funding.

"We are transitioning from our past life to our new life," said Carol Whiteside, president of the Great Valley Center.

The center will shrink its Board of Directors from 18 to 12 members and its current chairman will step down and allow UC Merced Chancellor Carol Tomlinson-Keasey to take the helm as chairwoman.

However, the center will continue to be operated by Whiteside and her support staff.

The center's board voted unanimously Thursday to approve the partnership, which is effective Jan. 1. Whiteside said the center had been in serious negotiations with UC Merced since July to work out the partnership.

UC Merced hopes to gain a stronger foothold on regional issues by utilizing the center's informational and civic engagement resources, along with developing new research and recruitment opportunities.

"That regional focus is important to us," Tomlinson-Keasey said.

She said working together to improve the region's economy and educational attainment, can help the Central Valley make positive and long-term public policy choices.

Faculty members and students will be incorporated in research and leadership projects in conjunction with the center.

"This university is big on getting its students involved in community service. We know a lot of communities that will benefit from that service," Whiteside said. "This helps us be relevant with fresh new ideas."

Since its inception in 1997, the center has brought together the region's leaders to identify problems and find solutions that affect the entire region like air quality, land usage, water rights, better Internet connections and improvements to Highway 99.

But the center has had some financial difficulties and had to reduce its staff in the past year to overcome those funding limits, said Whiteside, a former Modesto mayor.

The foundations that funded the center's launch eight years ago are now looking to other priorities.

UC Merced's ability to draw funding support is expected to change things for the Great Valley Center. The new campus has brought in more than \$15 million in grants and contracts for research and other university programs, mostly from federal agencies.

UC Merced and GVC fundraisers will combine their efforts in seeking new financial support from foundations, private donors, corporations, philanthropists and government contracts.

The partnership will not change the center's nonprofit status and donations remain fully deductible for individuals and corporations. It also doesn't prevent the center from working with other higher education institutions.

Two California foundations that helped establish the center -- the James Irvine Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation -- have pledged financial support to the center through this transitional phase.

Stephen Toben, president of the Flora Family Foundation, said the center has had a remarkable run of support.

"It's the perfect next step," Toben said of the merger.

Street designs promote walking

Officials hear how wider crosswalks, other changes improve city

By Julie Fernandez, Staff writer

Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, Nov. 17, 2005

When Tulare resident Don Manro envisions a perfect community, one of the many things he sees are bicycle paths to wildland areas.

Laurel Barton, who works for the Parks, Recreation and Library Department, sees a city with more trees that would double the amount of existing shade.

"It would make the climate more pleasant to walk," Barton said.

Manro, Barton and others who attended the Walkable Communities Workshop in Tulare on Wednesday heard two experts offer suggestions about how the city can encourage more walking and bicycling.

Bob Chauncey and Mark Plotz of the nonprofit National Center for Bicycling and Walking in Washington, D.C., are doing eight workshops in Tulare County this week at the request of the Tulare County Association of Governments.

Cities that design their streets for pedestrians instead of vehicles are helping improve [air quality](#) and address the nation's obesity problem and they will reap economic benefits as well, Plotz said.

He encouraged communities to:

- Install wide crosswalks in the downtown and school areas and use lots of paint to draw the attention of drivers and make pedestrians feel safer. Paint stop bars for the drivers.
- Provide islands on wide streets so children and older people who don't walk as quickly can have a safe place to wait if they can't make it across on one cycle of signals.
- Consider forbidding right turns on red lights.
- Install pedestrian countdown signals.
- Get rid of visual obstructions.

Plotz and Chauncey also encouraged the city to use traffic calming measures along wider streets.

"The wider the street, the more accidents tend to happen," Plotz said.

Roundabouts are a favorite of both motorists and neighborhood residents because drivers do not have to stop and they make less noise as a result, he said.

"You do have a lot of wide, wide streets, so if you want to do this you have the option," he said.

Installing bicycle lanes and striped medians are other ways of narrowing a street and slowing traffic, he said.

"When you give the bikers a place on the road, everybody does better," he said.

Reverse-angle parking in which drivers back up into a parking space is another technique that communities are starting to use, he said.

It is no more difficult to back into a reverse-angle space than to parallel park, he said.

The reverse-angle parking allows drivers to see better when they are leaving, access their trunk from the sidewalk instead of from the street and provides other safety advantages when removing small children from vehicles, he said.

"It sounds like there are some good reasons to consider that," City Manager Kevin Northcraft said.

Designing communities so children can walk to school is important and so are programs such as the "Walking School Bus," which addresses the fear parents have that their kids might be abducted if they walk to class, Chauncey said.

The Walking School Bus approach has parents living furthest from the school walking or, if the distance is too great, driving their children to a house that is closer. The parent there then walks all the children to school, he said.

Honda to expand natural gas Civic sales

By JAMES HANNAH - THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Modesto Bee, Cars, Friday, Nov. 18, 2005

EAST LIBERTY, Ohio - Selling cars powered by natural gas to U.S. drivers is no small challenge for Honda Motor Co.

Natural gas stations are few and far between, and until recently the vehicles were nearly as expensive to fuel as their gasoline-powered counterparts.

Now gasoline prices are up about 60 cents a gallon from a year ago and motorists can buy a device that allows them to get natural gas fill-ups at home. Honda plans to expand sales of the natural gas Civic GX next year to major cities around the country.

The automaker, which makes the car in this western Ohio city, hopes to triple its retail business -- going from about 500 cars this year to 1,500 in 2006.

"The market is coming to us," said Gunnar Lindstrom, head of Honda's alternative fuels division.

However, many of those who buy natural gas cars aren't driven by their pocketbooks. They like the idea of having a cutting-edge car that's less polluting and doesn't rely on foreign oil for fuel. And Lindstrom said the car is being marketed as a secondary, commuter car.

Automakers developed natural gas vehicles in hopes that their lower operating cost, cleaner burning fuel and nonreliance on foreign oil would create a market. By 2004, there were about 130,000 vehicles running on natural gas -- most of them buses, government vehicles and commercial vehicles. By comparison, there were about 230 million gasoline-powered cars and trucks.

The scarcity of refueling stations kept sales of natural gas vehicles down, and some automakers abandoned their U.S. production.

Honda, which first sold natural gas vehicles only to fleet operators, is the only U.S. automaker that produces a natural gas-only car for individual motorists. General Motors Corp. offers natural gas trucks but sold fewer than 1,000 last year.

Honda in April began selling the Civic GX in California, where there are about 135 refueling stations available to the public and natural gas cars are allowed to use the car-pool lanes even with a single occupant. The automaker had sold about 475 of the cars as of this week.

Then, Toronto-based FuelMaker Corp. began selling refueling machines that motorists can put in their garages. About 50 have been sold.

Fill-ups have been a hurdle in sales of natural gas vehicles, which don't have the range of gasoline-powered vehicles. The Civic GX can go up to 220 miles without refueling compared with 350 miles for the conventional, gasoline-powered Civic. There are about 600 public natural gas refueling stations in the United States.

"When we were kids, the ultimate dream was a gas pump at the house," said Jeff Church, 49, of San Dimas, who bought a home refueling machine a few months ago. "Now, I've got it."

Natural gas costs less

The suitcase-sized machine compresses natural gas from the lines in the home and pumps it into the car. The process takes up to eight hours and can be done overnight.

Church, a United Airlines pilot, bought a Civic GX so he could use car-pool lanes and avoid traffic jams. He's assured of getting to the airport within 50 minutes. With traffic tie-ups, the 42-mile trip can take two hours.

In spite of rising prices, natural gas still costs less than gasoline on a national average.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy's quarterly report on fuel prices released at the end of September, natural gas was 65 cents a gallon cheaper than gasoline. The price of natural gas is projected to rise this winter by as much as 50 percent -- which could make it more expensive than gasoline -- but could drop when demand eases after the winter heating season.

Automakers have also begun stepping up development of hybrid gasoline-electric vehicles to give customers more options in fighting higher gasoline prices. The hybrids have far outsold the natural gas

vehicles. For example, demand has grown to the point that Toyota Motor Corp. plans to raise annual production of its hybrids to 400,000 vehicles next year from 300,000 this year.

Tax credits offset higher prices

The Civic GX natural gas car looks, sounds and runs the same as a regular Civic. It costs \$21,700 -- \$4,500 more than the basic, gasoline-powered Civic.

The higher purchase cost will be largely offset by increased tax credits and incentives contained in a federal energy bill that goes into law Jan. 1. The bill will provide a tax credit of \$3,600 for the car and \$1,000 for the home refueling machine, which costs about \$3,500, plus \$500 to \$2,000 to install.

It also gives a \$30,000 tax credit to someone who builds a public refueling station. A highway bill that goes into law Oct. 1 adds a tax benefit of 37 cents a gallon for those who sell motorists natural gas.

Next year, Honda plans to sell the Civic GX in states and cities that offer additional financial incentives and allow owners easier access to car-pool lanes.

Colorado, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Rhode Island and Utah are among states that offer tax credits, which range from \$1,500 to \$4,000. A bill that would give a \$2,000 tax exemption is pending in Massachusetts. Vacaville offers up to \$4,500 to anyone who buys a new natural gas car.

Experts say motorists' fear of getting stranded on a long trip and the time needed to refuel at home could keep natural gas cars out of many U.S. garages.

"There are a lot of people trying out alternative-fuel vehicles," said Mark Bunger, principal analyst for Forrester Automotive, a technology research firm. Most of them do it, he said, because they hope it helps reduce pollution and makes the United States a little less dependent on foreign oil.

Bunger doubts that cars fueled by natural gas are going to appeal to mainstream consumers soon. "And I don't think it's ever going to be the dominant fuel source," he said.

Driver: Great for short trips

But some motorists are sold.

Mike Chemiczak, 46, of Cleveland, bought a Civic GX and a home refueling system because he's got a natural gas well on his property and gets his fuel for free.

Chemiczak said the car is great for short trips and perfect for him as he drives to work and then stops at rental properties he maintains. He estimates he saves about \$600 a month in fuel.

"People are very jealous," he said.

Md. to Restrict Coal-Burning Power Plants

Democrats Say Ehrlich's Plan to Limit Emissions Is Modest but Welcome

By Matthew Mosk and Elizabeth Williamson, Staff Writers

Washington Post, Friday, Nov. 18, 2005; B04

Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. yesterday announced tighter rules aimed at reducing the amount of pollution spewing from the smokestacks of the state's six largest coal-fired power plants.

The requirements, set to take effect next summer, could help Maryland meet most federal air quality standards well ahead of a 2010 deadline. Ehrlich (R) said he believes the rules also will aid in the recovery of the Chesapeake Bay, which he has made a goal of his administration.

"Today is a historic day in Maryland policy history," Ehrlich told students in an Advanced Placement Environmental Science class at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, where he unveiled his plan.

The governor told them that it was "the most sweeping, most far-reaching" initiative he could offer without crippling two of the state's largest power providers. "Policymakers try to achieve balance," he said. "I believe this is an aggressive but doable plan."

Several environmental leaders and Democratic lawmakers described the governor's initiative as a welcome, if modest, step.

"Look, it's better than not doing anything, and opposing everything. In that regard, I appreciate it and welcome it," said Sen. Paul G. Pinsky (D-Prince George's), whose own fresh-air legislation drew opposition from the governor during the last General Assembly session. "But this is an extremely modest measure. To say this is problem solved, it just isn't."

Pinsky and others said they would renew their push for a bill enforcing more stringent rules, noting that Ehrlich's proposal is a regulation -- more easily changed or relaxed than a state law.

"What's to stop him from reversing himself and getting rid of these rules as soon as people turn their backs?" asked Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, a Democrat running for governor who has endorsed Pinsky's approach. "That's why we need a law."

The governor's political supporters said the new clean-air initiative will burnish Ehrlich's environmental credentials in time for his 2006 reelection bid, especially when coupled with the "flush tax" he imposed two years ago to pay for improvements at treatment plants that dump sewage into the Chesapeake Bay.

Under the clean-air plan, three power plants in Montgomery County and Southern Maryland owned by Mirant Corp. and three in Anne Arundel and Baltimore counties owned by Constellation Energy Group will have to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide and mercury. The companies no longer will be permitted to purchase credits that enable them to bypass those standards.

Ehrlich said the new regulations come "with a serious price tag" for the two companies, estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Constellation released a statement yesterday saying that could mean higher electric bills for Maryland customers. A spokesman for Atlanta-based Mirant said officials there were studying the proposal.

In part, the proposal nudges the utilities in a direction they were being forced to go. During the Clinton administration, coal-burning power plants were classified as a source of toxic mercury and told to reduce mercury emissions by up to 90 percent by 2008. This spring, the Bush administration changed the standards, announcing rules that would have the plants cut mercury emissions by 70 percent by 2018. Ehrlich's proposal is aimed at meeting standards for ozone and fine particle reductions set for 2010, goals established by the Environmental Protection Agency last year for communities that do not meet the nation's smog standards. The District and surrounding counties and cities in Maryland and Virginia were among 474 jurisdictions nationwide that failed to meet those standards.

Fifteen states and Baltimore are suing the EPA, pushing for stricter controls on mercury. Virginia is not a party to the lawsuit over mercury rules. Rules on nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and mercury emissions for Virginia "are a work in progress," said Frank O'Donnell, president of Clean Air Watch, a Washington-based watchdog group.

O'Donnell said Ehrlich's proposal "ignores the whole question of carbon dioxide from power plants, which is essentially protecting the power industry from doing its share to deal with global warming, and aligns this plan completely with the Bush Administration on that point."

Maryland Democrats suggested that Ehrlich chose to enact his plan through executive regulations, rather than do battle with the Democrat-controlled legislature over new pollution limits.

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) said lawmakers retain the authority to review the governor's plan or render it irrelevant by passing their own proposal.

"Can we make something good out of this? Absolutely," Miller said. "We can widen it, we can enhance it, we can put it into statute."

Miller said Ehrlich also may have inadvertently breathed new life into legislation that would seek a 90 percent mercury reduction far earlier than 2018, the deadline in Ehrlich's plan, as well as significant carbon dioxide emission restrictions, which go unaddressed in the plan.

But Sen. Sandra B. Schrader (R-Howard) said she does not believe that legislation will be needed.

"By coming out and stepping forward now, he has preempted their argument," she said.

Guest Commentary, Madera Tribune, Nov. 17, 2005

Great Valley Center's ambitious goals

By James A. Glynn -- Special to the Madera Tribune

The success of any organization, as far as I'm concerned, is based not upon setting objectives, but on accomplishing goals or continuing to work toward achieving them. In this regard, the Great Valley Center (GVC), organized by Modesto's former mayor, Carol Whiteside, and concentrating on the eight counties that make up the Central Valley from Stockton to Bakersfield, is demonstrating the political and social practicality of regional planning.

Gov. Schwarzenegger's multiple trips to the Valley prior to last week's election demonstrates that the Central Valley has become a "player" in state politics. Moreover, earlier this year, he signed Executive Order 5-505, which created a task force known as the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley.

Chaired by Sunne Wright McPeak, a Merced County resident who is the current state Secretary of Business, Transportation, and Housing, the partnership held its first meeting at the University of the Pacific Sept. 16. Its 26 members include eight cabinet secretaries, nine local government officials, and nine members of the private sector.

In order to make specific recommendations by its Oct. 31, 2006, deadline, the panel is divided into nine "working groups" to investigate economic development, higher education and workforce development, air quality and environmental protection, water quality, supply and reliability, K-12 education, transportation, land use, agriculture and housing, health and human services and telecommunications.

The next meeting is scheduled for December in Merced. To get a look at the meeting agendas and updates from the on-going studies, visit www.greatvalley.org/sjpartnership.

Sustainable Growth

One factor regarding the future of the Valley that is easily observable by our residents is population growth. It seems that wherever one travels along State Route 99, one sees new subdivisions being built. To the casual traveler, this may not be discernible in Madera because most of our new housing is in the northwest and away from the highway. However, the exponential increase in the number of people who will inhabit the Valley has long been known to scientists and trained observers.

Toward the end of October, demographers (population specialists), architects, and community planners met in Chico to discuss "Solving the Growth Puzzle," which is the topic of this year's GVC forum in Sacramento.

These experts will try to envision what to expect over the coming 25 years. The goal, of course, is to design a plan that will insure sustainability, the balance of people's needs with the area's business, agricultural and educational opportunities.

In 2001, the James Irvine Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation donated to "Building toward Sustainability," a GVC project to involve the area's youth in determining the future of their environment. According to the Winter 2004 "Great Valley News," by last year, "those efforts and the work of the Great Valley Center have paid off with hundreds of new leaders, more young people with a renewed belief in civic participation, the creation of youth philanthropy boards at community foundations in four regions and training resulting in more effective nonprofit groups."

The idea of focusing on the area's youth is to assure that today's programs to strengthen the Valley do not disappear as current opinion leaders retire from community service. The same edition of "Great Valley News" informs us that "two students in South Sacramento addressed youth concerns with substance abuse and gangs, while youth leaders in Madera County organized a college day for Hispanic students, promoting the value of college."

"Building toward Sustainability" also sparked discussion about the economic and social impact of an unsightly State Route 99. As a result, the GVC created a "Highway 99 Task Force Corridor Improvement Guide." Shortly thereafter, Ceres City Council passed a moratorium on off-site billboards along State Route 99. This resolution followed in the footsteps of Bakersfield City Council's ruling and the Madera County Board of Supervisors' similar decision.

In the Fall 2005 edition of "Great Valley News," founder Whiteside said, "In the San Joaquin Valley, supervisors have endorsed principles to guide growth that would have been hard to imagine a decade ago." It seems to me that this kind of cooperation is absolutely necessary in order to build a better future for the area.

Naturally, reaching consensus will require our elected officials to be open to compromise. However, compromise can be accomplished with a series of trade-offs. For example, Valley voters will be asked to approve or disapprove plans for a high-speed rail system on the November 2006 or 2008 election ballot. Obviously, the date for the election is still being negotiated.

According to current plans, six Valley cities have been suggested for station locations: Bakersfield, Fresno, Merced, Modesto, Sacramento and Stockton. If voters approve the concept, this means that Hanford and Visalia, which have already expressed a need for a high-speed rail station, may support the ballot in exchange for new or improved highway overpasses and the widening of State Route 99 through their region.

Great Valley Center suggests, creates and supports programs and projects that lead to regional planning and cooperation. Based on more than three decades of studying the process of urbanization, it seems to me that the GVC methods are the kind that can bring meaningful change to Valley cities, like Madera.

Jim Glynn is a professor emeritus of sociology and the author of several college textbooks in that field. He can be contacted at j_glynn@sbcglobal.net.

[Letter to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star, Nov. 18, 2005](#)

Don't let greed win

Editor: It is not necessary to read all of the nearly 1,000 pages of the Environmental Impact Report for the proposed Riverside Motorsports Park. The lives of all Merced county residents will change dramatically if this project is improved.

Buried in the verbiage is a word that should make us all cringe. When addressing the various areas of concern -- such as noise pollution, air pollution, and traffic congestion -- the word "unavoidable" shines like a neon sign. The draft concedes that there will be "unavoidable" negative effects in each of the above mentioned areas. When the EIR focuses on air pollution and health concerns, three other words shine as well. They have admitted that there will be "adverse health effects."

We should not settle for this kind of rationale. If we do, greed overshadows quality of life.

There is a cadre of highly paid RMP lawyers prepared to bully us into handing over our way of life. We should not let them do this.

One way to make our voices heard is to write to the Merced County Board of Supervisors.

Ron Loewe, Atwater