

Speakers air the benefits of synchronized traffic signals

By Mark Grossi

Fresno Bee, Thursday, October 13, 2005

Fresnans would save money and time if the city's 550 traffic signals were synchronized to cut down stop-and-go driving, and the San Joaquin Valley's air would be cleaner.

Those were the take-home messages from speakers Wednesday at a Fresno hearing called by state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, in his clean-air campaign for the Valley.

Fresno, a city of nearly 500,000 producing plumes of vehicle pollution daily, is trying to get such a system working. Modesto, a city with less than half of Fresno's population, has had one for a decade.

Fresno has constructed a center to monitor and control timing of traffic lights, but the vast wiring system to each light is not yet in place.

Florez has seized on traffic light synchronization in the Valley's biggest city as one of many air-quality fixes to explore. Over the past two years, his hearings have focused on everything from diesel school buses to emissions from dairy cows.

He noted Wednesday that pollution from cars and trucks is the major air quality problem in the Valley, which ranks with Los Angeles among the worst air basins in the country.

"We need to reduce emissions from mobile sources," he said.

Engineer John Ennis, who once worked for Fresno on its project, said the idea of synchronizing traffic is simple: "You make the lights stay green for a platoon of cars passing through a corridor. You improve the capacity of the road and you improve air quality."

Over the past several years, the city has wired signals in central and eastern Fresno. Officials plan another phase of the job during the next year, but questions remain about how the city would pay to maintain the system. More than \$12 million in federal funds have been invested so far.

Deputy City Manager Jon Ruiz told Florez the city is collecting information about traffic from the partially built system, which includes video cameras. There was no estimate on when the system would synchronize traffic.

The project would reduce vehicle pollution, said an official from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. But Tom Jordan, special projects administrator, said that the district does not view air quality as the biggest selling point of the project.

He said other programs -- such as heavy-duty diesel engine replacement -- take more pollution out of the air for the amount of money spent.

"We support synchronization," Jordan said. "But we think air quality is kind of an 'also' benefit."

Christina M. Atienza of the Bay Area Metropolitan Congestion Management Agency said their studies show their regional synchronization system reduces travel time and fuel consumption by 13%. But pollution is reduced by only 7%, she said.

Still, cars and trucks accelerating from a complete stop account for a large chunk of vehicle pollution: 40% of the hydrocarbons and 60% of the oxides of nitrogen. The hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides combine in the air to form corrosive ozone, the main gas in smog.

People have embraced the synchronization system in Modesto, said Firoz Vohra, deputy director of Modesto's public works department.

"Our numbers show a \$9.4 million savings per year in gasoline," he said. "It is just tremendous. I advise you put aside other priorities and synchronize your traffic."

California lawmaker plans big bond measure to fight air pollution

By TIM MOLLOY, Associated Press Writer

in the San Francisco Chronicle and Los Angeles Times, Thursday, Oct. 13, 2005

Los Angeles (AP) -- A California assemblywoman who suspects pollution contributed to the cancer she was diagnosed with last year announced plans Wednesday to seek an air cleanup bond that could cost the state between \$2 billion and \$5 billion dollars.

The announcement by Assemblywoman Jenny Oropeza, D-Long Beach, followed a hearing in which lawmakers heard nearly three hours of testimony linking air pollution from California's ports, trucks and other shipping sources to deaths, childhood illnesses and even poor fetal development.

The state Air Resources Board released a study earlier this month that found diesel emissions from the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports are increasing cancer risks miles inland, creating a potential risk of 50 additional cancer cases per million people within 15 miles of the facilities.

There are about 2 million residents in that area, and the greater Los Angeles area has the nation's dirtiest air.

"This issue really came home when I was diagnosed with cancer last year," said Oropeza, who is seeking a state Senate seat next year. "It really brought home to me that I live in a highly polluted area."

She said she suspected her liver cancer, which is in remission, was caused by exposure to pollution and an immune system weakened by stress.

Oropeza said she has not determined the exact dollar amount of the bond measure, which would need to be approved by two-thirds of the Legislature, signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and go before voters by November 2006 in order to take effect.

She said the amount would be "in the ballpark" of \$2 billion to \$5 billion, saying a study by the Schwarzenegger administration had estimated that as the cost of cleaning up pollution related to shipping.

California Environmental Protection Agency spokesman Mike Wintemute said late Wednesday that the dollar figures were a preliminary estimate by the state Air Resources Board that was mentioned in an administration report but had not been generated by the administration.

Oropeza said anti-pollution measures funded by the bond could include replacing high-polluting diesel engines and old cars and having ships shut off their diesel engines and run on electric power while in port.

Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Katherine McLane said she couldn't comment on legislation that doesn't yet exist, but said the governor's budget this year already allocates \$88.5 million for similar programs.

"His administration is engaged in a comprehensive review of California's coming infrastructure needs and environmental issues are front and center in that process," McLane said. "He's glad that the assemblymember shares his environmental priorities."

The bond initiative could come at the same time as one proposed by Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, who last month called on Schwarzenegger and other lawmakers to support a statewide bond to shore up aging levees and make other infrastructure improvements.

Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, said reducing air pollution may be a priority for California but that the state should pay for it by cutting other costs, not going deeper into debt.

"People ought to get used to the notion of reprioritizing, and when we have something of a higher priority, find something else to cut," Coupal said.

Some measures proposed by Oropeza would be largely symbolic of the state's commitment to clean air, said Andrew Antwih, chief consultant to the Assembly Transportation Committee, which Oropeza chairs.

Among them would be more funding for plug-in hybrid cars, which get even better gas mileage than traditional gas-electric hybrids such as the Honda Insight and Toyota Prius. Though hybrids don't need to be plugged in, some people have modified them to add extra batteries that can be recharged from a wall outlet.

City missing \$80k of alternative fuel City tries to figure out where natural gas went

By Julie Fernandez, Staff writer

Tulare Advance-Record, Wednesday, Oct. 12, 2005

The city of Tulare is looking for \$80,000 worth of natural gas.

An inventory at the end of the city's fiscal year, June 30, discovered that the city paid for more liquid natural gas than it used at the station where the city's natural gas-powered vehicles are filled.

Public works director Lew Nelson said he is looking at three possibilities for the discrepancy:

- The city did not receive all the fuel it was billed for.
- The meters that record the amount of fuel pumped into the city's tanks were inaccurate.
- Liquid natural gas "vented" excessively into the atmosphere because of pressure buildup inside the tanks.

Nelson says he doubts that venting caused an \$80,000 loss.

A certain amount of venting occurs when deliveries are made, but not \$80,000 worth, Nelson said Tuesday.

"Other users have losses that are typically about 5 percent [of what they purchase]," he said. "It seems when we compare our losses with other users, ours are excessive."

A \$25,000 loss would be "typical" for Tulare, which purchased about 500,000 gallons last year, he said.

Nelson said discrepancies of between \$60,000 and \$80,000 have existed for at least three years — he was hired as assistant public works director in late 2002 — and he is tired of it.

"We're going to get to the bottom of this," he said.

The fuel is delivered as liquefied natural gas. But at the fuel depot some goes into tanks for vehicles that use compressed natural gas and the rest goes into LNG tanks.

The city is asking the county to inspect and recertify both the CNG and LNG tanks to make sure they are accurate.

Nelson has asked the city's former natural gas provider, Alternative Liquid Technologies in Topock, Ariz., for "weight tickets" to verify the company delivered the amount of fuel reflected on city bills, he said.

After discrepancies were found in the 2003-04 fiscal year ending June 30, 2004, the company was asked to provide the weight tickets on a monthly basis, but that did not happen, he said.

Steve Bartlett, chief operation officer for Alternative Liquid Technologies, said he suspects several factors are involved in the fuel loss, and his company is cooperating with the city's effort to find out what is at issue.

"There's got to be something going on," Bartlett said. "The primary cause is normally venting, depending on the usage or lack of use. [But] as long as the consumption rate is adequate, there's usually not significant venting."

The city's current natural gas vendor, City Energy, was selected because the company offered a better price. It has been asked to provide the documentation on a monthly basis so the city can keep track of purchases in a more timely manner, Nelson said.

The city has 58 CNG vehicles in use or on order, and 20 LNG vehicles.

The city plans to add three LNG refuse trucks, another CNG street sweeper, two CNG cutaway transit buses and a CNG Honda Civic passenger car in the current fiscal year, which will end June 30, 2006, Nelson said.

Because of the price difference between natural gas and gasoline or diesel fuel — \$1.80 versus \$3 per gallon — the city has saved money with the alternative fuel even with the \$80,000 natural gas loss, Nelson said.

"Natural gas is less costly and soon to be much less costly," he said, explaining that the Internal Revenue Service is planning a 50-cents-a-gallon rebate on the tax for natural fuel.

The city built its LNG fueling station in 2001 with a \$1 million grant and \$300,000 of its own money. Grant money also has helped pay for many of its alternative fuel vehicles.

The city was recognized by the American Lung Association in 2002 as a Central Valley leader in reducing air pollution by presenting it with the Central California Clean Air Award.

Smog cops on patrol -- but don't fear penalties

The Bakersfield Californian

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Oct. 13, 2005

They may be the only smog check guys you'll ever love.

The team roaming Bakersfield this week has an offer you can't refuse: They check your car free of charge, and they don't penalize you if a black cloud the size of a mastodon gushes from your tailpipe.

Before you scramble to make an appointment, there's a catch. They have to pick you.

Every few years, the state conducts a survey to randomly gather emissions data, said Howard Pittman, one of the smog check guys.

Pittman's actual title is "Air Quality Representative II," and he works for the Bureau of Automotive Repair, a branch of the Department of Consumer Affairs.

The information Pittman and others collects helps them figure out whether California's emission reduction programs work or not.

So, from about 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., the team waits for an assisting California Highway Patrol officer to pull over cars.

The team checks to see if the selected car is needed for the survey. If so, it does a quick smog check. The process takes 10 minutes or less.

Participants receive a copy of their inspection reports at the end of a check, sometimes getting a free warning of problems. The team also tells them if they spot a mechanical problem during the inspections.

The team checks about 30 cars each day, and Pittman said they were in the same ZIP code about four years ago.

The checks are scheduled to continue today and next week.

"You'll see us around," Pittman said.

For more information on the Bureau of Automotive Repair, visit www.smogcheck.ca.gov.

Council ready to battle for 'sphere'

City now has to convince county commission that it needs lots of room to grow

By JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Oct. 13, 2005

Bakersfield City Council members want 111.8 square miles of land on all sides of the city added to the territory Bakersfield can annex.

The land, mostly farm and ranch property, would be included into Bakersfield's "sphere of influence."

"I believe it would be poor planning on our part if we didn't take the action we are going to take tonight," said Councilman David Couch.

Development Services Director Stan Grady said Bakersfield needs to know how big it will be able to grow in order to do a good job planning how to grow that big.

But Wednesday's move sets up what could be a tough fight to convince the Kern County Local Agency Formation Commission that Bakersfield needs that much new turf in its "sphere."

This isn't the first time Bakersfield has asked LAFCO to extend its "sphere of influence" out to Interstate 5 and a dramatic distance to the south.

The last time the request was made, in 1998, LAFCO chopped the city's plans for expansion down to a sliver.

And officials with LAFCO, which is charged with managing the boundaries between governments and their spheres of influence, have already expressed concerns with such large expansion plan.

Road rumblings

City of Bakersfield engineers and executives are hungry to spend some \$642 million in federal road money to build the city's future freeways.

City Manager Alan Tandy, in a report to council members, displayed a list of all the work done already by city staff since Congressman Bill Thomas secured that money for Bakersfield in recent months. The list was long and written in tiny print.

Tandy's message was clear: Bakersfield is moving fast and everyone else involved should speed up to catch them.

"Caltrans has a good attitude but a different clock than ours," Tandy said.

Tandy said the city will be hiring a dedicated team of engineers that will work full time, all the time, to build the roads and spend Thomas' money.

New seats for park plan

City Council members also approved a \$400,000 increase in spending for the \$10 million new park on Stockdale Highway at the Kern River.

The money would pay to add 1,000 permanent seats to the amphitheater in the park and between 800 to 900 mobile bleacher seats.

Tandy said the city's rapid growth in the area is generating dramatic park development fees -- the charge placed on new development to pay for parks.

That money will offset the cost of the new improvements, he said.

Maggard makes it official that he will seek supervisor's seat

Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, Oct. 13, 2005

Bakersfield Vice Mayor Mike Maggard will run for Kern County supervisor, he announced Wednesday morning.

Maggard will seek to replace Barbara Patrick as the supervisor representing the Third District in next year's election. Patrick has announced her retirement from the board.

The announcement came at a press conference on Panorama Drive in northeast Bakersfield -- the area he represents on the council and the eastern end of the third supervisorial district.

District Three covers north Bakersfield. No other candidates for the position have announced their plans to run but political observers say there will be several people running.

Maggard has served on the City Council since he was elected in 1998. Before that he served on the Bakersfield City School District's governing board.

Maggard is a certified public accountant.