

## **Warming Trends**

### **Wood fire a favorite, but air regulations turning up gas sales**

by Ben van der Meer

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2005

Chilly temperatures are typical visitors in late fall.

For people who don't want to use just furnaces to stay warm, the crackle of wood fires long has been an appealing option.

But air quality concerns are pushing residents to buy cleaner-burning gas or wood-pellet inserts for their homes, according to John King, owner of Valley Fire Place in Salida.

"Our business is about 95 percent natural gas," King said. "There are still restrictions on burning wood, and they don't want to spend money if they think they can't burn three years from now."

The Central Valley's consistent air quality woes have led to San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District regulations on wood-burning fireplaces and stoves, and also wood-pellet inserts. The district issues advisories urging residents not to burn wood — or wood pellets — when forecasters predict that the air quality will be bad. On some days, when the quality is expected to be particularly bad, the district can ban burning.

District public information representative Anthony Presto said the district has yet to issue a ban in the Northern San Joaquin Valley. The district prefers that residents use natural gas, because it burns more cleanly and is more efficient than wood burning.

He added that wood-pellet stoves or inserts, though also subject to wood-burning restrictions, are considerably cleaner burning than wood-burning stoves or fireplaces.

Companies like King's now install fireplaces that still burn wood and send smoke out chimneys, but come with Environmental Protection Agency-certified equipment that makes them less polluting.

If someone is having a EPA-approved fireplace or insert installed, King said, prices start around \$2,000.

Of the three options, a wood-pellet insert costs about \$2,200, a gas stove \$1,800 and a wood-burning fireplace \$2,500 to \$2,800. The type of model and its features can push the price higher. Rebekah Jones, co-owner of Fire Design in Modesto, said gas inserts start at \$2,600, wood-burning fireplaces at \$3,200 and wood-pellet inserts at \$3,600 or more. Free-standing stoves are about the same, she added.

Firewood sales heat up

With natural gas prices expected to be significantly higher this winter, some folks are moving back to firewood, said Ed Alves, general manager for Lionudakis Firewood in Escalon.

"It's just frantic," he said. "Normally, we sell a lot of firewood, but I see more of a sense of urgency this year."

If someone is burning wood, Alves said, the clean way to do it is to make sure the wood is dry and burn the fire as hot as possible. Both steps reduce the smoke and the particulate matter that the air district is worried about.

King said that beyond cost, a customer's best bet is mostly a matter of aesthetics.

"A lot of people just like to see a fire," he said. "But then you have spiders with the wood, and ashes, and the hassle of getting firewood."

Brenna Butler, fireplace sales manager at Tidwell Enterprises in Modesto, said the trend in new and existing homes is away from wood-burning.

But those with custom homes in the foothills still want the crackle and sparks of burning wood, she added.

"A lot of people feel that wood burning gives an ambience to the room that you don't get with gas," she said.

Jones, with Fire Design, said shoppers need to have a long-term perspective.

"With wood, you have the maintenance of getting the wood, hauling the wood, bringing it back in your house," she said.

Pellet stoves need a thorough cleaning annually and require electricity, she added.

Sellers: Inserts use little gas

Customers worried about energy prices are overestimating how much natural gas an insert uses, she added.

"Once you put a gas insert into your fireplace, it's like putting a furnace in your fireplace," she said.

Mike Jones, a Del Rio resident who recently had two gas inserts put in his home, said he wanted something that produced warmth but didn't make work for him.

"I'm not one of the people that really has to have that," he said of building a fire and keeping it going.

The inserts are warm, he said, but he didn't give much thought to paying more in natural gas bills. "They're supposed to be a heck of a lot higher, right?" he asked. "That does hurt some."

## BART seeks Valley's input

ERIN SHERBERT - Record Staff Writer

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If you want a reliable connection to BART, this is your chance to say so.

Bay Area transportation officials are working on a 50-year blueprint for future transit systems, including possible Bay Area Rapid Transit extensions, expanded commuter train service from the Central Valley and better bus systems.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission is looking for ideas from Valley residents, who are encouraged to attend a series of workshops over the next two weeks. A Modesto workshop is planned Tuesday.

The workshops come just a few months after the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission, which owns and operates the Altamont Commuter Express, decided to move ahead with plans to study new routes for the commuter rail service, including a train from Modesto to Sacramento.

That service would accommodate as many as 10,000 Modesto-to-Sacramento commuters, officials have said.

More than 75,000 San Joaquin County residents commute to surrounding counties. Of those, 50,000 cross the Altamont Pass. And as their commutes get longer, they're choosing to use city and county streets over the traffic-jammed highways.

"You are seeing a lot more people using rural roads, and we need to start addressing this, because they are getting more crowded with commuters," said Patrick Hannan, spokesman for the MTC, the Bay Area's transportation-planning agency.

San Joaquin County leaders say that's also why they're interested in expanding Valley rail service.

"They can only expand highways so much," said Brian Schmidt, rail program manager for ACE.

ACE operates three daily round-trip commuter trains between Stockton and San Jose with stops in Lathrop, Tracy, Pleasanton, Fremont and Santa Clara. About 1,300 people ride the trains each day.

ACE also wants to create a direct link to BART's planned Brentwood extension, which is expected to begin service in 2010, officials said.

Also on the MTC's workshop agenda is the California High Speed Rail project. Participants can discuss the potential route for the bullet train between the Central Valley and the Bay Area.

The California High Speed Rail Authority approved the final routes and environmental documents last month for the train linking San Francisco and Los Angeles. The agency said it wanted to

study further the potential routes between the Central Valley and the Bay Area.

One possible route includes the Altamont Pass, which San Joaquin County officials favor.

### **Report notes risks to valley's quality of life**

By SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2005

The Central Valley can't afford not to protect its air, water, land and other natural resources, according to a new study and analysis by the Great Valley Center.

Today, the Modesto-based nonprofit released "The State of the Great Central Valley," a report on the region's progress on air quality, energy consumption and other issues since 2000. While the valley has made some gains, particularly in air quality, those gains might be outpaced by pollution from a growing population, the study says.

And environmental hazards threaten the future economic health of the valley, according to the think tank.

"It's going to impact the attractiveness of this region to highly educated workers," said Richard Cummings, director of research and communications at the Great Valley Center.

That's an accepted philosophy among locals trying to attract high-paying jobs to Kern -- white-collar workers want a healthy environment, access to cultural events, low crime rates, affordable housing and good schools. In short, good quality of life.

"The businesses we would like to attract hire more highly trained, more educated people," said Guy Greenlee, director of community and economic development for the county.

"Those persons are typically looking for a higher quality of life."

### **Port welcomes electric utility vehicles**

REED FUJII

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STOCKTON -- Port of Stockton officials today expect to take delivery of four electric utility vehicles to replace an aging fleet of gasoline-powered pickup trucks.

The vehicles are produced by the Global Electric Motorcars, or GEM, division of Daimler-Chrysler, said Mark Tollini, port deputy director.

He described them as small trucks with a two-seat cab and a long, flat bed in the back with a stake rail.

The battery-powered GEMs will be used by port maintenance workers, clerks and other employees to make short trips around the sprawling complex.

"These will allow us to park those other vehicles and, hopefully, make some small contribution to the environment here," Tollini said.

The shift to electric vehicles is one sign of trend toward environmentally friendly practices by ports up and down the West Coast, he added.

"It's not just Stockton."

Tollini said the street legal vehicles will cost the port about \$10,000 apiece.