

Council member urges colleagues to fight passing track.

By Matt Leedy / The Fresno Bee
Tuesday, March 28, 2006

Council Member Brian Calhoun will ask his colleagues today to join him in opposing plans to lengthen a stretch of railroad track in northwest Fresno.

A proposal by train officials to add 2.5 miles of track alongside the existing Burlington Northern Santa Fe line in northwest Fresno has angered Calhoun's constituents.

Residents have crowded into neighborhood meetings and loudly voiced their concerns: that the additional track will only be used to park more trains just beyond their Figarden Loop homes, lead to more diesel pollution, snarl vehicle traffic and make too much noise.

The additional track would change a turnout track (where one train waits for another to go past) into a passing track (where two trains can roll past each other), according to officials with BNSF and the California Department of Transportation.

They say the passing track is needed to keep trains moving and accommodate an increasing number of trains traveling up and down the state.

But Calhoun says rural Madera County, just north of the San Joaquin River from northwest Fresno, would be a better place for a passing track.

Calhoun wants the City Council to pass a resolution opposing the passing track to be read at the California Transportation Commission's meeting late next month.

For the passing track to be built, at a cost of \$12.7 million in state money, the commission must approve the expenditure.

"We're making a statement to the California Transportation Commission," Calhoun said. "I'm looking for my council colleagues for support. It's not just my issue, it's their issue, because it's an issue of quality of life in Fresno. Everybody in the city of Fresno, sooner or later, is going to be affected by this decision because it involves traffic issues, air quality issues and noise."

Monica Moens, who lives in Figarden Loop, said a freight train was parked on the turnout track behind her backyard for several days last week. The train's graffiti-marked freight cars are visible from her home.

"Who wants to look at that all day?" asked Moens, 45, who is opposed to the passing track proposal because she believes it will lead to more trains parking behind her home. "I think it's going to be one big parking lot."

Judge allows expansion of industrial site

By Jessica Logan, staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, March 28, 2006

The Tejon Ranch Co. cleared a major legal hurdle on Friday that will allow it to develop another part of its sprawling property despite concerns from environmental organizations. The Center for Biological Diversity, the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment and the Sierra Club sued the county, which approved the plan in 2003.

These organizations believed that not enough research was completed on the environmental impact to satisfy state law.

A Kern County Superior Court judge agreed and ordered further study at the time.

More study was done over the past couple of years and the company made a deal to give money to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

That money would be spent to help clean the air, and offset the pollutants the industrial complex may cause. The money will also replace old and pollution-producing equipment.

The judge reviewed these changes and ruled Friday that the company fulfilled its obligations needed to build.

Company spokesman Barry Zoeller said no date is set yet to break ground, nor is a completion date set.

The new development will cover about 1,110 acres. The complex already developed 330 acres just west of this, Zoeller said. It will include industrial and commercial buildings, he said.

But John Buse, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, a Tucson, Ariz.-based environmental policy group, said he fears the company's proposal to offset pollutants may not be successful in the long run.

Buse also said that any new equipment would need to be replaced in the coming years.

That means the air pollution would only be helped for those years when the equipment would have been used, but the complex will continue to pollute every year, Buse said.

He said polluted air can cause long-term health problems including increased sickness and, at times, death.

Tejon Ranch attorney Robert McMurry said the project would not cause pollution.

The air quality control board agreed to offset this development's pollution every year, McMurry said.

Buse said his organization will consider an appeal and also will continue to monitor the development at Tejon Ranch.

The ranch has about 270,000 acres of land, and about 5 percent will be developed in the coming years, Zoeller said.

Inhalers may take a bigger chunk out of your wallet

Price increase to hit Tulare County's poor the hardest

By Jed Chernabaeff, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, March 28, 2006

Deana Ivie, 45, of Tulare woke up 45 minutes before her alarm clock rang Monday morning not because she wanted to get up early. She couldn't breathe.

Ivie, who has asthma, says she depends on her rescue inhaler to stop asthma attacks.

"Not having my rescue inhaler is like jumping off a cliff with no safety," Ivie said. "The rescue inhaler is my safety net."

At the Visalia medical office of Rabinder Sidhu - a board certified allergist and clinical immunologist - Ivie blew into a machine that tested the strength of her breath.

Ivie gave a strong breath, then dropped to her knees from a coughing attack.

"I'm sorry, I just can't breathe," she said between coughs.

Ivie said she relies on medical insurance to cover the cost of her asthma medication.

"If I didn't have insurance, I would probably have to give up and die," she said. "I wouldn't be able to afford it."

While Ivie has insurance, which helps cover the rising cost of asthma medications, there are many Tulare County residents who don't, said Dr. Ron Marconi, medical director of Kaweah Delta's rehabilitation hospital.

"The cost of our inhalers have gone up," Marconi said. "It could be a big problem for those who don't have the means to pay for the rise in cost."

Marconi said the reason for the increase in the price of asthma inhalers is because of a supply shortage as drugmakers switch production to a new environmentally-friendly design.

After 2008, emergency inhalers that contain chlorofluorocarbon - or CFC's - may no longer be produced or sold.

This has forced some asthma patients to buy the more expensive inhalers that do not contain CFC's, and has pressured manufacturers to produce more environmentally-friendly inhalers, said Stephanie Moen, spokeswoman for the Tulare County Asthma Coalition.

"It's hard to gauge what the impact will be for Tulare County residents," Moen said. "It's never good when the cost of medications go up."

Marconi said treating asthma with rescue inhalers is a common practice for Tulare County's poor because they avoid the cost of using other medications that would prevent asthma attacks.

"People rely on rescue inhalers because they work quickly," Marconi said. "Now with the added cost, there could be a problem."

According to a University of California Los Angeles Center for Health Policy Research report, about 31,000 low-income people over the age of 65-years-old were diagnosed with asthma in Tulare County. There were 21,000 low-income children ages 1 to 17 in Tulare County diagnosed with asthma.

With the rising cost of rescue inhalers, Marconi said some low-income people will "cheat," or opt not to purchase the more expensive non-CFC inhalers.

"[The poor] might take a chance and not buy a rescue inhaler because it's costing them twice as much," Marconi said. "People with asthma just can't afford to go without inhalers. When you don't have a rescue inhaler it can lead to death."

Tulare County pharmacists and doctors say the increased demand will hurt the pocketbooks of asthma sufferers who pay cash for treatment. But they expect prices of the new environmentally sound inhalers to go down as soon as the market has more manufacturers making the new inhalers.

"Will the new inhalers go down to the same price as the old ones? It's hard to tell," Sidhu said.

Dennis Vermillion, pharmacist and owner of Town Center Pharmacy, expects the prices to rise and eventually come back down.

Vermillion said the current rate of a generic CFC albuterol inhaler has patients generally paying \$20. The non-CFC inhalers cost about \$40.

While Vermillion expects prices to eventually decline, he said what patients in Tulare County need to know is when to use their rescue inhalers.

"Patients are using the rescue inhaler not in a preventative state," Vermillion said. "They are using it reactively. People should use other inhalers on an as-needed basis to avoid using the rescue inhaler. If there are patients using the rescue inhaler five times a day, they should reevaluate what they are doing."

Move to charge toll for driving in core of downtown area

County transit panel to receive \$1 million from U.S. for study

Becky Bowman, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, March 28, 2006

Congestion charging -- imposing a toll on drivers in a city's downtown core -- is about to take on a bureaucratic life of its own in San Francisco.

In a sign that the musing of one Board of Supervisors member is on course to become reality for Bay Area motorists, the San Francisco County Transportation Authority soon will receive \$1.04 million from the Federal Highway Administration -- and add \$260,000 in local funding -- to study how to implement a program similar to London's 3-year-old system of charging a flat fee to drive downtown during business hours.

That's \$1.3 million to figure out how to collect millions from drivers willing to pay the freight to give a financial boost to public transit systems and perhaps curb traffic congestion.

And that's how, not if.

The London program that caught the attention of Supervisor Jake McGoldrick, a frequent visitor to the United Kingdom, has reduced downtown traffic congestion by about 30 percent and vehicle emissions by about 12 percent, said Jamie O'Hara, spokesman for Transport for London, the city's transportation agency. It's also put about £200 million, or about \$350 million, into government coffers since it was implemented, O'Hara added.

"One of the key things here is to change behavior in a way that people are going to see a benefit," said McGoldrick, who urged the transportation authority to apply for the federal study money. "The benefit is of course that, first and foremost, we improve the efficiency of our public transportation system."

"I think it's inevitable that there will be some kind of congestion charging in San Francisco and the top 20 cities in the country," he added.

Officials here hope a program could achieve similar goals of providing money for the Municipal Railway, clearing roads for Muni buses and trains and cutting air pollution, transportation authority representatives told its Citizens Advisory Committee this week.

The authority -- formed in 1989 to administer a half-cent transportation sales tax and governed by the Board of Supervisors -- will look at the city's most congested areas for consideration as charging zones, including streets approaching the Bay Bridge and Doyle Drive, the stretch of Highway 101 that runs through the Presidio, said McGoldrick, the authority's governing board's chairman.

Authority staff members and outside experts also will discuss where charging should occur as well as pricing, payment and enforcement methods as it studies the concept for the next 18 to 24 months, said Tilly Chang, authority deputy planning director.

"It sounds lengthy, but typically our transportation studies of this magnitude take one to two years," Chang said. San Francisco received the largest of 16 grants to study innovative ways of reducing traffic congestion, the Federal Highway Administration said.

The transportation authority will consider options for implementing a charging zone in San Francisco, Chang said. Fees could be fixed or vary by location or hour, include discounts for residents or hybrid vehicles or direction of travel.

Researchers also will study how money made by the charging zone could be spent -- on transportation, transit, bicycling and walking or other improvements, Chang said.

"It's a huge revenue generator," Chang said. "People might get behind it if they know the revenues are reinvested into making transportation better instead of floating off into a general fund."

London operates its congestion charge from 7 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Traffic signs alert drivers when they are about to enter a zone, where a system of 203 cameras tracks vehicles.

Motorists must pay the \$14 congestion charge before or on the day of travel and can pay by telephone, on the Web, at designated stores, by mail and even by text message.

The London program has generated more than half the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency's proposed 2006-2007 budget in its first three years of operation, O'Hara said. But it was also expensive to implement, using about £200 million in government funding.

A system in San Francisco could use a camera network like London's or a tag-and-beacon system, much like FasTrak, that would automatically pay the charge, Chang said.

On Friday, commuters picking up cars at downtown garages for the drive home expressed annoyance at the possibility of paying yet another fee to reduce congestion that isn't that bad.

"I don't like that at all," Daly City resident Jan Crowley said as she waited for her car on Kearny Street. "It's bad enough that I gotta drive, and pay to park, and now I have to pay to drive?"

Scott Allen, president of MacAdam/Cage Publishing, takes the ferry some days from Marin County, but also drives several times a week. He said he understands the concept of cutting congestion but says his commute is OK as is.

"It's not very heavy from Marin," Allen said of the traffic. "It's really a pretty easy drive."

In San Francisco, some public transit advocates have pushed without political success the idea of a special tax on downtown employers -- called a downtown assessment district -- to support bus and subway service.

At the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, a policy think tank backed by downtown commercial interests, congestion charging is more popular way of supporting transit systems because it raises revenue without discouraging business expansion, a recent report released by the group said.

Some business advocates, however, still have concerns.

Ken Cleaveland, lobbyist for the Building Owners and Managers Association of San Francisco, said it would be a mistake if it becomes a disincentive to locate or maintain businesses in the city.

"You need to be sure that it's not going to have an impact on downtown jobs and downtown businesses," Cleaveland said. "London's a different kind of city, and people are perhaps less wed to their automobiles than they are here."

Officials at the city's Chamber of Commerce also fear that limited car traffic in downtown could have a negative impact.

"San Francisco has been able to maintain a lively retail center downtown, which so many other cities have lost," said Carol Piasente, the chamber's vice president for communications. "You want to make it easy and accessible to people. You need to have a variety of transportation options."

In London, a city 10 times the size of San Francisco, officials face opposition again as they move to extend the charging zone to cover the Chelsea and Kensington districts of the city.

At Transport for London, the program is viewed as a big success.

"It was a bold step, but it's working," O'Hara said. "We're investing more and more into our transport system in London."

Still, some businesses have shut in the past three years and blamed the congestion charge, said Dan Bridgett, press and public affairs director with the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Small merchants, particularly restaurants, often rely on passers-by to supply a good portion of a day's business.

Bridgett said he would urge San Francisco's transportation authority to carefully consider a charging zone's impact on businesses that could be affected by economic downturns of even 5 or 10 percent.

"The margin between being in the black and being in the red," he said, "is very small."

Edison Moves to Reopen Big Desert Power Plant

The utility was forced to shut down the Mohave generating station in Nevada because of pollution issues.

By Marc Lifsher, staff writer
L.A. Times, March 28, 2006

Southern California Edison Co. and two Indian tribes have taken a tentative step toward reopening the giant Mohave power plant in Nevada that was shut down due to pollution.

Before being taken off line in January, the coal-fired plant was a major source of electricity for Southern California.

Under a proposed agreement with Edison, the Navajo nation and the Hopi tribe of northern Arizona would supply the 1,585-megawatt plant in Laughlin, Nev., with water from tribal lands and coal from the Black Mesa mine, which is owned by the tribes and operated by Peabody Energy Corp. In return, Edison and its partners in the Mohave power plant would make a series of payments to the tribes.

The proposal faces several major hurdles, including winning the endorsement of the two tribal councils, Congress, the Interior Department, Edison's Mohave partners and the California Public Utilities Commission.

What's more, Edison would need to install about \$1 billion worth of pollution-control equipment to satisfy a 1999 consent decree requiring the utility to reduce sulfur dioxide emissions from the plant, which was one of the biggest sources of air pollution in the Southwest and contributed to the haze that obscures views at Grand Canyon National Park.

The most controversial part of the proposed deal would allow Peabody to continue to draw water from the Navajo Aquifer, which the Indians rely on for drinking, farming and livestock. The water would be used at the Black Mesa mine to transport pulverized coal through a 273-mile pipeline to the power plant.

The proposed agreement, outlined in a March 7 memo and not yet binding on the parties, also would require the tribes, Edison and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to cooperate in the development of a new water source for the coal pipeline.

Allowing Peabody to continue using water from the aquifer could endanger a precious resource in the parched desert region, said David Beckman, a senior attorney in Los Angeles for the Natural Resources Defense Council. Last week, his group issued a report that it said contradicted government findings that Peabody's pumping did not exceed legal limits.

"Peabody has long claimed it intended to cease pumping from the [Navajo] aquifer, but this impending deal puts the lie to that claim," Beckman said.

Peabody spokeswoman Beth Sutton disputed the council's report: "The Navajo Aquifer remains healthy and robust."

Edison, the tribes and Peabody all declined to comment on the proposed agreement, which was first reported by the Gallup, N.M., Independent.

Mohave produced about 7% of Southern California's electricity before being mothballed New Year's Day after Edison failed to comply with the 1999 consent decree, which settled a lawsuit brought against the plant's owners by a coalition of environmental groups.

Bill Hedden, executive director of the Grand Canyon Trust, which spearheaded the lawsuit against Edison, said he was waiting to see whether the parties in the coal and water negotiations could overcome "a million complications" before dealing with Mohave's air pollution problems.

The closure of the power plant was a blow to the local tribal economies. The plant was the only customer for coal from the Black Mesa mine, and 600 high-paying jobs - mostly filled by Navajos - were eliminated when the Mohave plant closed. In addition, the Navajo and Hopi governments lost the millions of dollars they received each year in royalty payments from the mine.

Edison, a unit of Rosemead-based Edison International, owns 56% of the Mohave plant and was its operator. The remaining ownership is divided among three partners, including the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.