

McPeak urges Valley to unite

Collaboration leads to influence, state business official says in Fresno.

By Sanford Nax

The Fresno Bee, Thursday, March 9, 2006

The San Joaquin Valley has reached the "tipping point," and continued strong commitment from business and civic groups is needed to ensure the region falls into a period of robust economic growth, a state official said Wednesday in Fresno.

"What makes a partnership go is when the leadership comes from the business community," Sunne Wright McPeak, secretary of the California Business Transportation and Housing Agency, told more than 300 people who attended an annual business executives breakfast hosted by The Business Journal and sponsored by California Business Machines.

McPeak was joined at the podium by Fritz Grupe, a Stockton-based developer who has constructed about 50,000 homes during a 40-year career. He helped develop Woodward Lake in Fresno.

"It still has water in it," he quipped.

McPeak said Valley political and business leaders have been successful at getting the attention of Gov. Schwarzenegger and others. As a result, the governor formed the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, a task force of 18 business and local government leaders and eight members of his Cabinet, to find ways to enhance the economy and quality of life in the Valley, she said.

Toward that end, the partnership will hold a forum April 7 in Fresno. The goal is to gain more ideas on how to bring more jobs and make other improvements from Bakersfield to Stockton.

Although jobless rates have improved, the unemployment rate in many of the Valley counties is substantially higher than the state average.

The partnership aims to develop recommendations by Oct. 31 and present them to Schwarzenegger and representatives of the various counties and cities.

McPeak talked about the importance of collaboration and the influence that a unified region can wield. She also commented on the good relationship she has with Fresno Mayor Alan Autry.

"Alan and I get along really well because I know cows," said McPeak, who was raised on a dairy farm in Livingston. "You know manure and when you are about to step in it."

Calling Highway 99 the "backbone" and "Main Street" of the San Joaquin Valley, McPeak said the governor is supporting a \$6 billion effort to upgrade the roadway from Stockton to Bakersfield within 10 years.

The ambitious plan would widen the highway to a minimum of six lanes, add new interchanges and remove crossings where country roads knife through the highway instead of above it via overpasses.

McPeak said some funding could come from Schwarzenegger's \$107 billion transportation proposal.

The governor wants to issue \$71.5 billion in bonds to help finance the effort.

She talked of the need to preserve farmland while still satisfying population growth. She noted that a \$2 million grant was awarded to the Merced County Association of Governments to help finance a blueprint for planning land use and transportation programs in the growing San Joaquin Valley.

"You are part of a larger region," McPeak reminded business executives.

"The notion of region is important."

In response to questions from the audience, McPeak said that to create more affordable housing, cities and counties have to set aside land and subsidies have to be more plentiful.

Grupe added that prevailing wage laws, which mandate that California's prevailing wage be paid to people who work on projects getting government assistance, must be modified. He also called for reform of the California Environmental Quality Act, which is the state's review process.

In response to a query about air pollution, both speakers called for more higher-density and mixed-use projects that would limit automobile use.

Region may not meet air standards

BY RYAN SCHUSTER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, March 10, 2006

Efforts to get San Joaquin Valley's air quality in compliance with federal ozone standards appear to be far from on schedule. According to a report by the air quality work group of the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, the region is expected to fall 50 percent to 80 percent short of a 2013 deadline to meet Environmental Protection Agency standards. If the valley doesn't measure up by June 15, 2013, it faces losing billions in federal transportation funds.

"The longer we delay in getting our air quality under control, the longer our residents, which includes families, will be exposed," air quality work group member Pete Weber said during a partnership board meeting Thursday in Bakersfield.

Brenda Turner, a spokeswoman from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's Bakersfield office, said she doesn't think the region is off by as much as the work group's estimate, but said "meeting the standard by 2013 will be a considerable challenge."

She said the region is making progress toward meeting a 2010 EPA standard for particulate matter, but said the 2013 ozone guidelines will be more difficult to reach.

"It's going to require everyone making some sacrifices for us to be able to meet the standards that are before us," Turner said.

Air quality was one of several issues related to improving the region's quality of life and economy discussed by the partnership's board meeting Thursday. The group also met with local officials and heard public comments.

Some ideas the group came up with to reduce pollution include:

- Giving companies incentives for switching to emission-reducing technologies.
- Increasing incentives for motorists to voluntarily replace older polluting automobiles with newer, cleaner ones.
- Encouraging funding for trading out diesel trucks and farm equipment for more efficient newer models.
- Evaluating local and regional mass-transit options.
- Studying the possibility that portions of Interstate 5 and Highway 99 becoming toll roads.

Turner said the air district has several plans in place to meet the looming deadlines, including:

- Regulating pollution created by new development.
- Working with farmers and developers to control dust.
- Winter wood-burning rules.
- Summer Spare the Air program.

Turner said vehicles cause more than 60 percent of the region's air problem.

"We have one of the most severe air pollution problems in the entire nation and maybe even the world," Turner said.

EPA, automakers reach deal on mercury switch recovery program

Associated Press
Motorway

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Hoping to reduce harmful mercury emissions, the Environmental Protection Agency, the auto industry and environmental groups said Wednesday they have agreed to start a national program to collect mercury switches from scrapped automobiles.

Mercury switches were used in antilock brakes and in convenience lights in trunks and under the hoods of vehicles built as late as the 2002 model year. An estimated 35 million switches are currently being used in vehicles, the auto industry reports, and some automobiles have multiple switches.

The program, announced as a tentative agreement by the EPA and several groups, would recover and recycle the pellet-sized switches before the vehicles are shredded and crushed for recycling.

It would build upon programs used by some states and try to prevent mercury from being released into the environment when the vehicles are crushed and shredded. Mercury collection and education programs are currently used in Arkansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina and Texas. State lawmakers are considering programs in Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, New York, South Carolina, and Utah.

"The hope is that we would be able to deal with the problem nationally as opposed to on a state-by-state basis," said Charles Griffith, auto project director of the Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Ecology Center.

Coal-burning power plants are the largest source of mercury emissions in the United States, according to the EPA. The mercury switches, which automakers began phasing out of their vehicles in the mid-1990s, make up about 0.1 percent of mercury contamination caused by human activity, the EPA has reported.

Mercury released into the air can accumulate in plants, fish and humans. Children and fetuses are vulnerable to the effects of the toxic metal, which can damage the development of the nervous system.

Under the tentative agreement:

- Automakers and the steel industry would create a three-year, \$4 million fund to support the program. Both industries would promote the program.
- Automakers would be responsible for the collection, transportation and recycling of the switches. Auto dismantlers who recover the switches would submit them to the program.
- The program will be regularly evaluated to assess its progress. It's expected to be used until 2017, when about 90 percent of the vehicles containing the mercury switches will be off the road.

The groups said in a statement that they still need to complete details on how to implement the new system, which could be put in place as early as next summer.

EPA spokesman Dave Ryan said the agency looks "forward to having more to say when the parties complete a formal agreement."

In addition to the EPA, the groups involved in the negotiations included the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, the American Iron and Steel Institute, the Steel Recycling Institute, Environmental Defense, the Ecology Center and the Environmental Council of the States.

The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers said in a statement it "continues to believe that a comprehensive strategy is necessary to reduce mercury in all consumer products."

Green Technology Investments Boosted

By TERENCE CHEA, The Associated Press

Published in the Washington Post, Wednesday, March 8, 2006

SAN FRANCISCO -- Venture capitalists are seeing green in clean technologies.

The amount of North American venture capital invested in environmentally friendly technologies jumped 35 percent last year to more than \$1.6 billion, according to a report to be released Wednesday by the Cleantech Venture Network.

"Cleantech" investments by venture capital firms rose to a record \$502 million during the fourth quarter of 2005 _ 18 percent more than the previous quarter and 60 percent more than the same period a year earlier.

"We saw consistent upward growth in the amount of investment, the number of investors and the range of things invested in," said Nicholas Parker, chairman and co-founder of the Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Cleantech Capital Group.

The cleantech sector encompasses a wide range of technologies related to water purification, air quality nanotechnology, alternative fuels, manufacturing, recycling and renewable energy such as solar, wind and hydrogen.

In last year's fourth quarter, cleantech companies attracted 10 percent of all North American venture capital, making it the fifth most popular sector behind biotechnology, software, medical technology and telecommunications, the report said.

Energy-related ventures focused on efficiency, generation, infrastructure and storage accounted for 34 of the 73 deals last quarter, attracting \$179 million in venture investment.

Parker attributed the growing interest in clean technology to the rising cost of fuel and other natural resources, driven largely by rapidly expanding economies in Asia.

"Being much more efficient with natural resources is now an economic imperative," Parker said. "The rise of China and India and other emerging market economies is forcing up prices of natural resources of all kinds."

Investors are also seeing better prospects for returns as technologies advance, more seasoned managers and entrepreneurs enter the field and cleantech companies book higher sales.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Thursday, March 9, 2006:](#)

A done deal

I'm curious to know why the city is spending so much money to research leaf blowers. With all the support to ban these machines, I'm left to wonder who's actually supporting them.

They create air pollution from their exhaust. Strike one. They create even more air pollution from the dust and debris they blow around. Strike two. They create noise pollution in a most annoying way. Strike three.

Three strikes, let's get them out!

Bryan Parisi, Fresno