

Rail expansion opposed

Fresno council voices opposition to new track in Figarden Loop area.

By Matt Leedy / The Fresno Bee
Wednesday, March 29, 2006

A unified Fresno City Council voiced its opposition Tuesday to the proposed expansion of a railroad track in the Figarden Loop area.

The city leaders unanimously approved Council Member Brian Calhoun's resolution opposing a plan to add 2.5 miles of track alongside the existing Burlington Northern Santa Fe line in northwest Fresno.

The proposal has angered many Fresnoans who live near the track. They fear an expanded passing track will lead to air and noise pollution and be used to park a string of graffiti-marked trains.

"I think what they want there is more room to park trains," said Loran Harding, who lives about a quarter-mile from the BNSF line in northwest Fresno.

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

The passing track is needed, they say, to accommodate an increasing number of trains traveling up and down the state.

But before construction can begin, about \$12.7 million in state money must be approved by the California Transportation Commission.

The City Council's resolution opposing the plan will be read at the commission's meeting late next month. The meeting will be in Fresno City Hall.

At Calhoun's urging, the council is asking the commission to deny funding for a passing track in northwest Fresno. Instead, city leaders suggest BNSF and Caltrans consider expanding a turnout in rural Madera County, just north of the San Joaquin River.

Construction drives economy

Fresno-area building down, but still key to jobs, payrolls, study says.

By Sanford Nax / The Fresno Bee
Wednesday, March 29, 2006

The construction industry, one of the chief accelerants of the Fresno-area economy, will slow over the next few years, but is still likely to be a major supplier of new payrolls, a university economist said in a new report.

"The construction sector will lead other sectors, at least until the end of 2006, registering 7.5% job growth in 2006. While it will slow considerably in the following years, it will still add nearly 3,000 jobs between 2005 and 2008," Sean Snaith, who heads the Business Forecasting Center at University of the Pacific in Stockton, reported in an economic forecast released Tuesday.

Snaith predicts personal incomes to expand at an average of 5% per year through 2008, which would be slightly lower than the state's 5.7% average. Population growth will decline gradually from 1.5% last year to 1.1% in 2008, while the jobless level will fall modestly from 9% in 2005 to 8.7% in 2008, he said. That unemployment rate would be among the highest in the state but still well below the double-digit levels characteristic of much of the past two decades.

In an interview, Snaith said the double-digit unemployment rate, which he called "once a standard," will tumble as the central San Joaquin Valley expands. He also said the Valley is undergoing an economic metamorphosis.

"The economy has stepped up into the next league," he said.

Snaith said that while growth projections for Stockton and other north Valley regions are more robust, he is bullish on Fresno.

Stockton, Sacramento and neighboring cities are benefitting from a strong Bay Area influence. Fresno is too far away to reap as much reward but is getting some.

An estimated 25% of all new homes in the Fresno area last year were bought by families moving from the San Jose and Los Angeles regions, builders estimated.

Those buyers are still active in 2006 but not at the same level as last year, said Darius Assemi, a principal of Granville Homes in Fresno.

With a Gross Metro Product of \$34billion by 2008, the Fresno area will boast a stronger economic punch than Stockton at \$25billion. Fresno's Gross Metro Product in the last quarter of 2005 was \$31.3billion.

The Gross Metro Product is the total economic output, whether it is agriculture products, dentist visits or the manufacturing of concrete bricks.

"Fresno already has a well-established university and is at a critical mass where it is starting to generate jobs internally," Snaith said. "The speed at which it occurs could be debated. Will it be at the same scope as the Inland Empire [Riverside/San Bernardino counties]? Probably not, but there is a clear parallel."

Home prices in the central San Joaquin Valley are half the state median, which provides incentive for families to relocate to Fresno and other communities, he said.

However, the housing prices soared so much over the past few years that the number of families who could afford a median-price house fell to less than 20%. "It is probably true that the peak was making it difficult for people to move up, but businesses coming in from outside don't see it as a bubble," said Scott Johnson, Fresno's interim economic development director.

This year, home sales have slowed, and prices are leveling off. Prices of existing houses in some neighborhoods are drifting down, and the number of building permits for single-family houses in Fresno and Madera counties have decreased.

Permits fell 14% in January and 17.7% in February from the same periods a year before, the California Building Industry Association reported.

Despite the slowing, traffic at Granville's housing tracts remains strong.

"Late January and February were very vibrant," Assemi said. "Traffic at all of our sales pavilions are up substantially."

Snaith said home sales statewide peaked in 2005 and that housing starts will cool this year as mortgage rates start a slow climb. Prices are settling, but he said he does not expect a collapse unless a fundamental change occurs in the economy.

"There is no sign that the demographic, macroeconomic and financial underpinnings will dissipate. Barring any reversals ... the talk of a bubble will just seem like a lot of hot air," he said.

Hot air is one issue that Sierra Club representative Kevin Hall thinks could crimp the Valley's growth. The Valley's notorious air pollution could end up stunting growth.

"Air pollution is the hidden cost of living and doing business in the Valley," Hall said.

When cleaning, be aware of pollutants

Bernadette Fay

S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, March 29, 2006

As people start spring cleaning, even more volatile organic compounds (VOCs) will waft into the environment. According to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, consumer products generate 51 tons of pollution a day and account for 10 percent of the VOC pollution in the Bay Area.

To keep you breathing easier while you clean, the air quality district advises:

Open a window: Pollution indoors can be two to more than 100 times higher than outdoor air.

Fill a room with flowers or plants: Try a vase of daffodils, hyacinth or freesia instead of fragranced cleaning products. Or try a pot of ivy, golden pothos, chrysanthemum and spider plants, which help remove air pollutants.

Look for eco-friendly ingredients: In detergents, look for products containing plant oils like coconut rather than petroleum; in disinfectants, look for plant oils eucalyptus, rosemary or sage rather than triclosan.

Use environmentally friendly products: Aerosols such as furniture polish, oven cleaner and bathroom cleaners contain VOCs. Use products that come in solids, sticks and gels instead.

Stick with cloth rags: Experts estimate that more than 160,000 metric tons of wipes were dumped into landfills in 2005.

Replace your old vacuum: Older models weren't designed to eliminate dust and particulate matter (PM), small particles that can enter your lungs and cause health problems.

Injury delays Kennedy talk until April 22

By Lorena Anderson

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, March 29, 2006

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., scheduled to speak at Modesto Junior College on Friday night, has postponed his speech.

Fittingly, however, the environmental activist is to speak on Earth Day.

Kennedy tore his rotator cuff, a series of shoulder muscles and tendons, and needs surgery. MJC spokeswoman Linda Hoile said Kennedy still wanted to be here this week, but doctors advised against it.

Hoile said MJC will honor tickets people bought for this week's event, and will issue refunds for those who cannot make the new date, April 22.

This week, Kennedy said he is familiar with some of the Central Valley's biggest concerns — water and air quality, and the loss of farmland.

"Environmentalism is about how we allocate the resources on our planet," Kennedy said Monday. "Everyone in the Central Valley has an interest in how those issues are resolved."

Kennedy, the son of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and the nephew of President John F. Kennedy, has taken his politics to the courtroom as the senior attorney and spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

He is also an author and president of the Waterkeeper Alliance, a coalition of more than 100 environmental groups dedicated to protecting North American waterways.

Kennedy also works as a clinical professor and supervising attorney at Pace University School of Law's Environmental Litigation Clinic and is co-host of "Ring of Fire" on Air America Radio.

Kennedy is to speak at 7 p.m. April 22 in the gym of the MJC East Campus, 435 College Ave. For more information, call 575-6866.

Nader turns high beams on auto safety

Advocate claims industry, feds ignore tech advances

By Ken Thomas, Associated Press

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, March 29, 2006

WASHINGTON — More than 40 years after "Unsafe at Any Speed" shook up the auto industry, Ralph Nader is returning to his roots.

The longtime consumer advocate and former presidential candidate contends that the auto industry has failed to push technology that could make vehicles safer, cleaner and more fuel-efficient.

Nader accuses the government of acting as a "consulting firm" for U.S. automakers. And he wants to open an office in Detroit to monitor the industry that helped propel him to fame in the 1960s.

"My indignation level is rising again. The gap between the government's dereliction and these kinds of efficient, safe, clean technologies has never been greater," Nader said. "NHTSA's now a consulting firm for Detroit."

Nader's 1965 book, "Unsafe at Any Speed," pointed to safety problems in the Chevrolet Corvair, leading to congressional hearings and federal safety laws. He has not ruled out a presidential bid in 2008, saying he will decide sometime after November's midterm elections.

He has refocused his attention on the industry at a time when General Motors Corp. and Ford Motor Co. are downsizing as they deal with growing health care and pension obligations and intense competition from Asian automakers.

Nader has urged the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to improve a proposed roof-crush standard, calling it insufficient. In August, he urged the government to warn consumers about Ford pickups and sport utility vehicles under investigation for a defect that may have caused engine fires.

And last month, he released a lengthy report describing several missed opportunities to improve fuel efficiency and safety in vehicles. The report by his Center for Study of Responsive Law argued that automakers have suppressed technological advances by suppliers; insurance providers have failed to offer incentives for safer vehicles; and the government has been reluctant to improve technology in its fleet vehicles.

"There's a huge backlog of practical technologies for improving the safety of motor vehicles, their fuel efficiency, [emission controls](#), ease of repair that are piling up on the shelf and not being implemented," he said.

Nader's critics are numerous, from Democrats who still blame him for Al Gore's defeat in the 2000 presidential election to industry officials who view Nader and the consumer groups he helped develop as adversaries who fail to acknowledge the high costs of some of the technologies.

NHTSA spokesman Rae Tyson defended the Bush administration's progress in auto safety, noting that fatality rates have reached an all-time low and seat-belt use has reached new heights. "They certainly suggest an agency that is very, very committed to improving highway safety," Tyson said.

Regarding seat-belt use, Tyson said: "It certainly would be helpful, with their voice, if they could address some of the behavioral issues which could have an immediate impact on reducing the number of serious injuries and fatalities that are occurring on the nation's highways."

Automakers point to safety upgrades in recent years driven by competition and the realization that safety sells. Side air bags are available on about 75 percent of new vehicles and will be standard equipment by 2009. Anti-rollover technology such as electronic stability control is available on more than 60 percent of 2006 models.

"Public demand for safety technology is at an all-time high and automakers are responding to that by engineering more safety technology into the vehicles," said Eron Shosteck, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers.

For the record

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, March 29, 2006

UC Davis researcher Frank Mitloehner's ongoing study of air pollution from dairy cows is being paid for by state and regional air agencies. A story on Page B1 Monday was unclear.