

Experts fret over 2010 Valley smog deadline

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee
Thursday, May 18, 2006

The San Joaquin Valley faces what might be an impossible air-quality hurdle: meeting a new smog standard in four years.

That message surfaced Wednesday at an air-science symposium in Fresno where researchers, industry lobbyists, regulators and environmentalists talked about the latest findings on the Valley's dirty air.

The area needs to trim 60% of smog-making chemicals by April 5, 2010, according to estimates from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"Reductions of even half that much would be difficult," said district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "To give you an example of how hard it would be, we couldn't get there if we shut down every business in the Valley."

The district always has said the new standard would be a challenge — this area never attained the old, less-stringent standard. But this was the most pointed assessment to date.

Sadredin said the district will need the help of stricter state and federal fuel and engine standards planned in the next few years.

But the district still may have to extend the cleanup time by asking to be designated in the same worst-offender category as Southern California, which has the highest concentrations of smog in the country.

Scientists and regulators Wednesday said the Valley's air problem is quite different from Southern California's. While smog does not spike as high here as it does in Southern California, the Valley's pollution simmers longer above the threshold for healthy air and generally causes more violations.

An official from the California Air Resources Board, which supervises the state's air quality, said the days of focusing mostly on Southern California's needs is over.

"The Valley is also front and center in our efforts now," said Lynn Terry, deputy executive officer.

The Valley air district this year has asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to declare the air healthy for dust and soot pollution. Officials said there has not been a violation of the PM-10, or particulate matter standard, in three years.

But this area still regularly violates the standard for smaller particles, known as PM-2.5, which are about one-30th the width of a human hair. The combination of nitrogen oxides from cars and ammonia from agriculture can form tiny particles called ammonium nitrate.

"There is no single cause of PM-2.5," said researcher John Watson of the Desert Research Institute, who has studied Valley air pollution since the 1980s.

"It's a regional problem. You can't just go in and work on one place."

The microscopic speck can penetrate deep into the lungs, triggering asthma or even heart problems. Researchers have connected it with early death.

Kevin Hamilton, an asthma clinical specialist and health advocate, and others said the air research should be connected with the medical studies. He mentioned a California State

University, Fullerton, study indicating air pollution annually costs the Valley more than \$3 billion in medical bills, lost work time, suffering and early death.

State Air Resources Board officer Terry said research for many years emphasized air cleanup. But she agreed the health effects should be linked as much as possible now.

Air district member receives promotion

Visalia Times-Delta, Thursday, May 18, 2006

Visalia resident Rick McVaigh has been named to the No. 2 position in the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

McVaigh, who had been the district's director of compliance, now is deputy director/deputy air pollution control officer. He has worked in air pollution control since 1991 and has experience as a process engineer and chemist.

The Valley Air District covers eight counties, including Tulare, Kings, Fresno and parts of Kern.

Planning commission considers more homes

By DAVID BURGER, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, May 18, 2006

What's going on at the vacant corner of Gosford and Ming?

That issue and others will be discussed as the city Planning Commission meets at 5:30 p.m. Thursday in the council chambers of City Hall.

GOSFORD AND MING

Engineer McIntosh & Associates and property owner Castle & Cooke want a subdivision of 217 buildable lots on the southwest corner of Ming Avenue and Gosford Road.

All lots would be for single-family homes.

A public hearing is scheduled for the meeting after all property owners within 300 feet of the property site were notified.

Earlier condo and apartment proposals were opposed by neighbors, said city planning director Jim Movius. The neighbors, to the east and west of the site, cited decreased property values and additional traffic, among other concerns, when opposing the projects.

One project in the vicinity that created considerable anxiety was an apartment complex, at least three stories high, that would have contained nearly 500 apartments.

That plan has since been nixed, replaced by this plan.

McALLISTER RANCH

Southwest Bakersfield is about to get bigger as the 2,080-acre McAllister Ranch project makes it way through the commission, on its way to its hoped-for future annexation to the city.

A zone change from agricultural to a variety of other uses, including residential and commercial, will be sought.

The 3.25-square-mile master-planned community is bounded by Panama Lane to the south, between South Allen Road to the east and Nord Avenue to the west, and the Sunset Pacific rail line to the north.

Plans and environmental impact reports have been approved by the county. But for city annexation, a zone change is needed to fit within the city's plan, among other things.

LAFCO, the Local Agency Formation Commission, eventually makes annexation decisions.

Scientists urge federal support for plug-in hybrids

By KEN THOMAS

In the Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, May 18, 2006

A group of scientists urged Congress on Wednesday to fund research for plug-in hybrid vehicles, touting the technology as another way to reduce the nation's dependence on oil through the help of a simple electrical socket.

With high gas prices straining some Americans' budgets, advocates of the alternative vehicles told a House committee that plug-in hybrids could reduce gasoline consumption and reduce air emissions. And while ethanol-fueled vehicles will require a better network of fueling pumps, a plug-in hybrid car could recharge at home.

"To think that you could pull into your garage at the end of the day and 'fill 'er up' just by plugging your car into a regular, 110-volt socket in the garage is very appealing," said Rep. Judy Biggert, R-Ill., chairwoman of the House Science subcommittee on energy.

Plug-in hybrids combine hybrid technology -- which uses both gasoline and electric power -- with large batteries that can be plugged into a standard wall socket. To help learn more about the vehicles, Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, said he would introduce legislation to provide \$250 million in grants to research battery technology and develop a fleet of demonstration plug-in vehicles that could be further tested.

President Bush has called for more research to develop smaller, longer-lasting batteries for plug-in hybrids, noting that the technology could help motorists drive 40 miles on the battery without having to use any gasoline.

Dr. Andrew Frank, a mechanical and aeronautical engineering professor at the University of California, Davis, said researchers have developed preproduction vehicles but need funding to create a fleet of about 100 plug-ins that could be tested around the nation.

The auto industry has said the technology offers promise, but notes the current vehicles are not cost-effective and says it's too early in the development of advanced batteries and hydrogen vehicles to know whether they could be viable. Hybrids currently account for about 1 percent of the U.S. auto market.

The additional battery capacity can add up 500 pounds to the vehicle, reducing its performance, and the demands on the battery are greater, leading to faster deterioration of the battery.

John German of American Honda Motor Co. told lawmakers the technology offered potential, but the larger battery pack "adds thousands of dollars to the initial price of the vehicle and detracts from the performance and interior space."

Others have worried that thousands of plug-in hybrids could overwhelm the electric grid. Paul Williamsen, a product education manager with Toyota, told reporters Tuesday that the automaker found from experience with electric vehicles that consumers often plugged in their vehicles during the day, leading to "increased total consumption on the electrical grid during those peak daylight hours."

But Roger Duncan, deputy general manager of Austin Energy in Texas, said the obstacles involving the batteries could be addressed. The main obstacle, he said, is "automotive industry inertia based on a perception that there is not a commercially viable market."

City slow down

By John Upton, staff writer

Tracy Press, Thursday, May 18, 2006

A community group is heading to court to make sure Tracy's urban expansion follows rules voted into law in 2000.

Mark Connolly, attorney for Tracy Regional Alliance for a Quality Community, said recent Tracy City Council resolutions that will grant two developers priority home building rights in Tracy contradict the Measure A growth plan, a slow-growth initiative passed in 2000.

TRAQC filed a writ in San Joaquin County Superior Court against the city of Tracy on Wednesday to address what Connolly says are illegal changes to Measure A.

The City Council voted in April to start negotiating with Souza Realty and Development/AKT Development to build 300 new homes per year at Tracy Hills, and with The Surland Cos. to build 200 new homes per year at the Ellis project.

These agreements would remain in place until each of the subdivisions had been filled and they couldn't be scrubbed by future councils, he said. Nearly 10,000 new homes are planned between the two developments.

Measure A limits the number of new homes in Tracy to 600 new homes per year, meaning no more than 100 new homes could be built in inner Tracy per year.

This would cause most the city's population growth to be on the city fringes.

The developers are sweetening the deal by throwing in an aquatics center and sports facilities.

Connolly said the city doesn't need help paying for these, and he accused the developers of holding the city's children "hostage" by holding back on the projects unless they get what they want.

Connolly said the city should prioritize growth closer to central Tracy to make sure essential services are easily available to all residents, to ease traffic congestion and pollution and to make sure students attend nearby schools.

The council voted this month to change the city's growth plan to allow more than the 225 annual developer agreements that had been permitted under Measure A.

But Connolly said this is illegal.

TRAQC member Mavis Rowe said the people of Tracy knew and understood what they were voting for when they passed Measure A and that the council shouldn't supercede the will of the voters.

"It's morally wrong of the city to be trying to do this," she said.

The city has 190 days to respond to the writ.

[Visalia Times-Delta, Editorial, Thursday, May 18, 2006:](#)

Sales tax for roads has pitfalls, too

Frustration with the deteriorating state of roadways has reached the point where people will accept desperate measures.

Dedicating a special sales tax increase for road repair and maintenance is about as desperate as it gets.

Tulare County is considering that route, though. The county heard from a consultant this week that 59 percent of Tulare County residents would favor a sales tax increase to improve road conditions. If the proposal was to improve [air quality](#), the approval rate rises to 67 percent.

The county will consider the issue at a meeting next month.

There is nothing on the table to vote on, but in developing the policy for levying new sales taxes, the county ought to keep a number of things in mind.

We are wary of special taxes to meet a specific expense. Dedicated taxes are one of the problems that constrain California's ability to extricate itself from a fiscal cycle that is either boom or bust. The state Legislature has passed so many mandates for tax revenue, that the state

needs to continue to collect the tax and spend the money even when it isn't needed. That limits the state's ability to respond to changing fiscal conditions.

Assigning a specific tax to a specific expense can lead to some illogical connections between raising and spending. We are already starting to see that with higher taxes on tobacco products. The higher taxes discourage consumption, thus reducing revenue that could be applied to the specific need that was set up.

At least this tax increase would be a sales tax, which theoretically everyone pays, regardless of income level or station in the economy. It can lead to some unwanted consequences, however. For instance, what happens when Tulare County's higher sales tax begins to drive consumers of big ticket items, such as automobiles and major appliances, to other counties? Sales tax is not a steady source of revenue. The county might find itself not only having less money than expected for roads, but less money for everything.

Using the tax money equitably will be a problem. Most of the sales tax money will be collected in Visalia. Nearly all of it will be collected in the county's incorporated cities. Yet the money will have to be spent on rural in unincorporated areas on county roads. The county will have a hard time balancing that inequity.

The underlying problem with raising the sales tax to fix roads is that raising taxes ought not to be the first response of government to address a problem. We recognize that it is frustrating. Road condition and maintenance has been the chief topic for several county election cycles. At the same time, we have seen no other options presented for redirecting funding from other uses toward improved roads.

Road building and maintenance has become expensive, granted. It's a problem all over California. It has become worse, here and elsewhere, because regular maintenance was deferred during lean fiscal times.

Maintaining upkeep on roads is a matter of sticking to priorities. Few other things are more important to the county. As the county enters a period of tremendous growth, it needs to plan how it will establish new roadways and take care of the ones it has. We would prefer to see a plan that describes what the county's objective is, how long it would take to get there and how much it would cost. Then decide whether using increased sales tax, existing funding, grants and state money or some combination of them all might be the best way to proceed.

We all want better roads for Tulare County and they are desperately needed. Leadership is the art of accomplishing that with the strategies and resources available, not simply reaching for the first solution.

[Sacramento Bee editorial, Thursday, May 18, 2006:](#)

Phasing out 'perc'

Time to end use of dangerous chemical

Perchloroethylene, the dry cleaning solvent commonly known as perc, is one nasty chemical.

For those exposed to high levels of perc, the biggest risk is cancer. The chemical can also cause irritation of the skin, eyes, nose, mouth, throat and lungs as well as headaches, dizziness, nausea, fainting, coughing, fluid buildup in lungs and damage to the central nervous system, kidneys, liver and reproductive system. And it is a major water contaminant.

The California Air Resources Board has regulated it for years. The board is set to vote next week on a new set of more stringent controls: complicated new technologies; a ban on the establishment of new dry cleaning establishments using perc within 300 feet of residential neighborhoods; and the phasing out of existing perc machines in residential neighborhoods. The proposed rules also bar the practice of living above dry cleaning establishments.

These changes don't go far enough. Most dry cleaners are small, family-owned businesses. The people most at risk are the owners and employees exposed to perc for hours a day, week after week. The 300 foot buffer included in the CARB rule does nothing to protect them. In any event, complicated control mechanisms and operational rules are expensive and difficult to comply with and to enforce. CARB can do better.

To see how, look at the actions of the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which in 2002 imposed a 15-year phaseout period for all perc machines in the four county region it regulates. Proponents of phaseout argue persuasively that professional wet cleaning, a cleaning technique widely used in Europe, is a cheaper, safer and effective alternatives to perc. State regulators disagree. They contend that wet cleaning is not yet a proven technology and that the majority of dry cleaners in the South Coast, where perc is being phased out, are moving to a petroleum-based technique that causes smog.

If that's true, CARB needs to be more aggressive in its outreach and education efforts. There are state funds available to test new cleaning methods, to educate dry cleaners and to subsidize the switch to safer and cleaner technologies. CARB needs to redouble its efforts in that arena.

Dry cleaners are everywhere. If the perc dry cleaning is so dangerous that it can't be tolerated within 300 feet of a home or apartment, school or day care center -- which is what the CARB proposal contemplates -- its use shouldn't be tolerated next door to the barbershop at the minimall down the street. For the sake of public health, worker health and the environment, CARB ought to follow the South Coast's lead and phase out perc. The sooner, the better.