

In The News 05-30-07

Allensworth bill loses steam

Dairy-free zone for park, if approved, wouldn't take effect until next year.

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau
Fresno Bee, Wed., May 30, 2007

SACRAMENTO -- In a move that signals a lack of Republican support, a Democratic state lawmaker said Tuesday that she planned to remove an urgency clause in a bill that would establish a dairy-free zone around Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park.

That means that the bill, if passed, would not go into effect until next year -- leaving a window open for a dairy to locate near the park this year.

Passing an urgent bill requires 54 votes out of 80 in the Assembly -- a threshold that requires six Republicans to vote yes, assuming all Democrats vote yes.

Without the urgency, Assembly Member Wilmer Amina Carter, D-Rialto, can now get the bill passed with only Democratic support in both the Assembly and Senate. She would still need Republican Gov. Schwarzenegger to sign the legislation. The governor has not taken a position.

The Assembly is expected to approve removal of the urgency clause Thursday, unless Carter can find some last-minute Republican support. A vote on Assembly Bill 576 could come as soon as Monday.

"I just think it will be a better way to keep the bill going," Carter said of the amendment.

AB 576 would ban dairies within 2.5 miles of the park, a monument to Col. Allen Allensworth, the Civil War veteran who founded the Allensworth colony in 1908 as a haven for blacks.

Black leaders fear that two dairies planned about a mile and a half from the park would bring flies and odors, deterring park visitors. Opponents, including Assembly Member Bill Maze, R-Visalia, say the bill would undermine local land use decisions.

Supporters are confident they have the votes to pass the legislation, though a couple of Valley Democrats appear split on the bill.

Assembly Member Nicole Parra, D-Hanford, is a co-author and has already voted for the bill in a committee. Assembly Member Juan Arambula, D-Fresno, said he has not made up his mind but added that he is worried about setting a precedent of state lawmakers overriding a local decision.

"I'm kind of partial to local control," said Arambula, a former Fresno County supervisor.

The Tulare County Board of Supervisors approved the dairies in March. But that decision is being tested in a lawsuit filed in April by state Attorney General Jerry Brown, who says the supervisors ignored state environmental laws.

The county has yet to file a response, and no court hearings have been scheduled.

Both the legislation and lawsuit would likely be dropped if dairyman Sam Etchegaray of Visalia agrees to sell the land to the Trust for Public Land, a private nonprofit whose mission is to conserve natural and historic land.

Negotiations on a possible sale are continuing as the two parties wait for the land to be appraised. That process is not likely to be finalized until later this year.

Even if Etchegaray decides to go forward with the dairies, he still needs to get air and water permits. His lawyer, David Albers, said Etchegaray is still "a ways off" from getting those permits, but said it might be possible to break ground by the end of the year.

BAY AREA

'Spare the Air' trims will limit free rides

BART, Caltrain and ferries to charge full fare after 1 p.m.

Rachel Gordon, Chronicle Staff Writer
S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, May 30, 2007

The "Spare the Air" season opens Friday in the Bay Area, and regional officials have enough money to offer free transit rides on four smoggy days.

But unlike in the past, passengers will ride for free only until 1 p.m. on BART, Caltrain, Altamont Commuter Express trains and all ferries. Other agencies, including San Francisco's Municipal Railway, still will offer the free rides all day.

Complaints during last year's Spare the Air days focused on crowded trains and ferries filled with rowdy teens. Some regular commuters threatened to get back into their cars-- exactly the opposite of the program's goal of cutting traffic when vehicle exhaust is likely to create unhealthy levels of air pollution.

BART, for example, saw an increase in petty crimes when people were allowed to board free, said BART spokesman Linton Johnson.

Caltrain regulars griped about crowded trains. And ferry commuters, whose boats were packed with people looking for a cheap recreational activity, also complained about the Spare the Air free-transit days.

Organizers hope that limiting the no-fare hours on some routes will reduce problems, particularly during the evening commutes.

Still, most of the Bay Area's transit agencies will offer no-cost trips all day during transit-free Spare the Air days. More than two dozen transit operators will participate in the program this year.

The 2007 smog season runs through Oct. 12. The Bay Area Air Quality Management District chooses Spare the Air days based in part on weather patterns, usually a combination of high temperatures and little wind. Too many smoggy days puts the region at risk of losing federal transit funding.

There were six fare-free Spare the Air days offered last year -- three more than originally budgeted. There's enough funding for up to four days this year, said John Goodwin, a spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. His agency is providing \$7.5 million for the program; the air quality district will pony up an additional \$1 million.

Spare the Air to kick off another summer of free rides

Program's critics point out that Maze meltdown increased transit ridership more than program

By Douglas Fischer and Erik N. Nelson, MEDIANEWS STAFF

Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, May 30, 2007

OAKLAND -- Spare the Air season kicks off Friday, but rather than spend \$7.5 million on three free transit days, there might be a better way to lure commuters out of their cars:

Knock down a freeway span or two.

The free transit, which will officially be unveiled at a noon news conference but actually was approved by regulators in January, will provide daylong free rides on almost all Bay Area transit-- buses, BART, Caltrain, ferries -- for the first three Spare the Air days of the season.

It mirrors last year's regionwide free transit. That effort also started out with three days. After exhausting those days in June, agencies moved quickly to pay for three more. But a free ride only goes so far.

After a fiery truck crash April 29 closed a key section of the MacArthur Maze funneling traffic from the Bay Bridge to Interstate 580 and Highway 24, BART ridership eclipsed any gain seen with Spare the Air's free offerings.

Indeed, the 2.1 million riders using BART in the week after the Maze collapse were the most in BART's nearly 35-year history.

Although transit operators offered an estimated \$2.5 million in free rides April 30, it wasn't until the next day, when commuters had to pay normal fares, that BART recorded its one-day ridership record of 375,200. Two days later, BART saw its third-highest ridership, 374,200.

(The second highest all-time ridership, 374,900, came on Oct. 4, 2000, a day when both the Mets and Yankees were in town.)

In contrast, BART estimates last year's free ridership boosted ridership roughly 10 percent to about 360,000 riders on Spare the Air days. Typical ridership is about 346,000 riders.

No one, of course, is advocating more tanker crashes. Even mention of such on Tuesday appeared to blanch Randy Rentschler, spokesman for the agency charged with coordinating the Bay Area's traffic, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

But many transit advocates have urged regulators to employ both carrot -- free transit -- and stick -- higher tolls -- on Spare the Air days. And critics counter that free transit's environmental benefits don't justify the considerable expense.

The MTC said last year that the program cost \$411,000 per ton of smog-creating emissions reduced, 10 to 100 times more than other smog-fighting programs, such as paying people to scrap their old, higher-emission vehicles.

Higher bridge tolls on Spare the Air days could potentially pay for the program, said Stuart Cohen, director of the Transportation and Land Use Coalition. It also encourages more commuters to find a way to the bus or BART station.

"Right now we're doing free transit out of funding that could be expanding transit options or go for other transit projects," he said.

Rentschler cautioned that a bridge toll increase, even for a few days each year, is essentially a nonstarter because it requires a change to state law.

"Even if we wanted to do it, and we're not proposing it, that would be a heavy lift right there," he said. "It would not be in our mission to make things more inconvenient for people."

And commuting traffic represents just a fraction -- albeit a sizable fraction -- of the region's air problems when the heat spikes and the air gets hazy.

Other steps can be taken to reduce air pollution, particularly for those unable to take transit, regulators acknowledge. Such options include not fueling the car until night, or not barbecuing or mowing the lawn that day, or even not using certain evaporating personal care products, such as hair sprays.

Said Rentschler: "The idea of sparing the air comes from the fact that the Bay Area has very good air quality -- in fact, it's never been better -- but that on a certain few days, sometimes even a certain few hours, we do have an air quality problem."

For more information on this year's Spare the Air program and ways to reduce air pollution on bad air days, visit <http://www.sparetheair.org>.

Region aims for clean air

By Dave Downey

North Coast Times, Wednesday, May 30, 2007

Air quality has improved throughout Southern California to the point that San Diego County is on track to becoming the first metropolitan area in the state to pass federal smog tests, state and local officials said Tuesday.

San Diego County's new blueprint for curbing air pollution was approved last week by the California Air Resources Board and is on its way to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for final approval. The plan projects that the county's skies will meet federal rules for ozone by summer 2008.

If that happens, San Diego County will become the first metropolitan area with polluted air to be given a clean bill of health for ozone, said Dimitri Stanich, a spokesman for the Air Resources Board in Sacramento.

"That's a very big deal," Stanich said. "We've had a long struggle with combating ground-level ozone, which is the main ingredient of smog."

Ozone, a colorless but pungent and poisonous gas, forms when hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides belched by passenger cars, delivery trucks and factories cook in the hot sun to form a toxic brew that blows inland on the strength of sea breezes. Ozone impairs breathing. And prolonged exposure has been shown to damage lungs and lead to premature death.

With temperatures warming, this is the time of year ozone begins to approach unhealthy levels.

So far, Southwest Riverside County has logged one bad air day, with the Lake Elsinore monitoring station posting a reading exceeding federal ozone limits on May 19. San Diego County has not had any bad air days.

Under federal law, clean air is defined as exceeding federal ozone limits on three or fewer occasions within a year.

After recording five days of elevated levels in the summer of 2005, last year saw 14 such days in San Diego County -- the highest since the turn of the century, said Karen Jacobs, spokeswoman for the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District. She attributed the sharp uptick in large part to the heat wave that baked the region throughout July.

Tina Cherry, spokeswoman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, said Southwest Riverside County residents also saw more bad air days as a result of the persistent hot and humid weather. After logging 15 such days in 2005, the area had 20 in the summer of 2006, Cherry said.

The South Coast district regulates polluters in several counties, including Riverside.

San Diego County officials say they are confident their county will reach its federal deadline to clean up ozone by 2009, despite the spike in bad air days last summer, because overall emissions continue to fall.

"For a large metropolitan area to attain that standard in the face of incredible growth would be a remarkable success story," said Rob Reider, planning manager for the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District.

Meanwhile, South Coast officials say the air basin that includes western Riverside and San Bernardino counties, Orange County and Los Angeles County is not on track to meet a 2014 deadline to decrease soot.

Soot is a term that refers to the small particles that paint skies a hazy brown. That pollutant also invades the body's airways and impairs breathing.

Failure to meet that 2014 deadline could trigger the withholding of hundreds of millions in federal transportation dollars from the region.

Yet, Cherry said the Los Angeles-area agency, in revising its latest clean-air blueprint, has only been able to come up with a plan that will take 192 tons a day out of the air, 74 tons short of what is needed.

As a result, the agency recently declared a state of emergency in a bid to persuade the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to regulate diesel emissions from trains and ships, and to spur the state air board to more aggressively curb emissions from construction vehicles.

"In developing this plan, it's become painfully obvious that we are not quite there," said district spokesman Sam Atwood.

The prospect for future penalties aside, air quality officials in both counties are praying this summer will be cooler.

However, Bill Patzert, a climate scientist with the Caltech Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, suggested air quality officials shouldn't get too comfortable.

"I think it's going to be a scorcher," Patzert said. "And if you say hot, you mean smog."

Allies mobilize against Kamilos

Patterson group to present residents with a petition opposing air base proposal

By Garth Stapley

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, May 30, 2007

A small but influential group of Patterson people has formed to battle Gerry Kamilos' plan for a business park at the nearby Crows Landing air base with a rail link to the Port of Oakland.

"There will be a lot of money to be made by Kamilos if he can railroad this through, all at the expense of the West Side," reads a portion of the group's newly created Web site.

Its home page shows a circle with a line slashing over a picture of a train, with the words "the greatest threat to Patterson in its history."

Kamilos on Tuesday invited all input, including from critics, about his hopes of turning the former 1,527-acre air base into a 4,560-acre industrial center.

The West Side-Patterson Alliance for Community and Environment, or WS-PACE, will collect signatures at the Patterson Apricot Fiesta this weekend, said spokesman Ron Swift, former publisher of the Patterson Irrigator.

"We're asking people to sign a petition showing their dissatisfaction with the plan," he said.

Kamilos' company, PCCP West Park, is three months into an exclusive yearlong period of negotiations with Stanislaus County leaders for a development master plan.

The first quarterly report is scheduled to go before Stanislaus County supervisors on Tuesday. WS-PACE members say they will introduce themselves at a Patterson City Council meeting the same day. The group plans to hold another public meeting in the council's chamber a week later.

The group has met informally every week for six weeks. No chairman has been named, though Carolyn Harr and Burta Herger have agreed to serve as secretary and treasurer, respectively. Other members include former Mayor David Keller, West Side activist and Modesto Bee community columnist Claude Delphia, former Postmaster Sandy McDowell and farmer Ed Maring.

Swift said the group's members may establish a political action committee, enabling them to contribute to candidates or causes opposing Kamilos' plan, or supporting those fighting him.

"We know we don't have the same firepower and funding as Kamilos," McDowell said.

Delphia added: "But we are not without resources. The feeling (among West Siders) is so strong, we'll not have trouble raising money."

Thronges of West Side residents had come out against the Kamilos plan before county supervisors in late February selected it over a competing proposal by the son of businessman and former presidential candidate H. Ross Perot.

WS-PACE members said they would be mollified if Kamilos would limit his development to the 1,527-acre air base, as first envisioned by county officials, and turn away from the rail component. They predict disruptive congestion from long trains passing through the city.

"(Kamilos') information has alarmed us," Swift said.

The development would be about the size of Patterson and Newman combined, noted the group, whose members met Tuesday with The Bee's Editorial Board.

WS-PACE members say the plan would gobble up prime farmland and [create more air pollution](#).

"This will impact us probably more than anything has impacted the West Side," Swift said.

In another Tuesday meeting with The Bee, Kamilos emphasized that his plan does not include building homes.

"We have made a commitment; we are focused on jobs," he said. "We do not have a housing component."

Patterson City Council members two weeks ago said city staff will not cooperate with Kamilos by providing technical information unless he personally meets with the council. On Tuesday, Kamilos said he's eager to accept but has yet to receive an invitation.

As for the new group, Kamilos said, "We're actually encouraged. Whenever you get a group together in a forum to have more discussion, and both are willing to educate themselves on the issues, we see it as a positive for both sides."

A county staff report on his project, to be presented Tuesday, features a schedule for accomplishing key tasks, Kamilos said. They include completion of studies on traffic, water, sewage and drainage,

as well as a market analysis, prediction of economic benefits to the community and an overall master plan.

"I'm convinced more than ever that all infrastructure issues can be resolved," Kamilos said.

Town hall meetings inviting public feedback will be scheduled around the county, including the West Side, during the summer, Kamilos said.

[Stockton Record Editorial, Wednesday, May 30, 2007](#)

Dynamic duo tries to clear the air

Schwarzenegger, Brown doing the right thing on emissions standards

Round 2 of Gov. Moonbeam and the Terminator vs. the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency takes place today in Sacramento.

In Round 1, California Attorney General Jerry Brown pleaded with federal officials to allow a waiver from the 1970 Clean Air Act that would permit California officials to set their own, tougher vehicle emission standards for the state.

During a hearing in Washington, D.C., Brown argued that Californians and leaders in 11 other states "want to act now to combat global warming."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger underscored Brown's testimony by threatening to sue the agency if no decision has been made by Oct. 25.

They'll need more than catchy nicknames from past eras to alter federal law.

In 1978, then-Gov. Brown was referred to as "Moonbeam" by Chicago newspaper columnist Mike Royko because of his out-of-the-box thinking. Schwarzenegger, of course, was the star in three "Terminator" action moves.

They want California to become the first state with regulations on greenhouse-gas emissions that contribute to global warming.

California is the world's 12th-largest producer of greenhouse gases, 41 percent of which comes from transportation.

In 2002, state legislators passed a law requiring automakers to reduce tailpipe emissions beginning with the 2009 model year.

They can't enforce the regulations without a waiver of federal law. California already has dozens of such waivers, but this is the first time the request extends beyond the state's borders.

Brown and Schwarzenegger want to be global trendsetters. This isn't just about cleaning up the Los Angeles Basin. It's a bold effort to impose climate-change responsibility on national auto manufacturers.

Brown clearly placed that responsibility directly on Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Stephen Johnson, who has worked in the agency for 26 years and was appointed by President Bush.

"He is the one man in the country who can do the most to attack global warming," Brown said. "He can be a hero or a villain."

Schwarzenegger, listed among Time magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World in its May 14 edition, is proud of being the "green" governor. He said the EPA delay on issuing a waiver "borders on malfeasance."

His threat of a lawsuit is serious.

The state's case got some support in April when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that EPA administrators were wrong in concluding they don't have authority to regulate greenhouse-gas emissions linked to global warming.

The pressure from California officials continues during a second hearing in Sacramento today.

Whether state officials convince the four-member federal panel or not, California officials will continue pressuring for change.

There might be grandstanding. There might be more rhetoric than scientific certainty. Today's hearing also might feature political point-scoring and an inappropriate application of states' rights.

There's a strong argument that states don't have random authority to alter federal policy, environmental or otherwise.

Yet, given the delays by officials in Washington that span almost two generations, who better than a one-time ascetic and an Austrian-born muscleman to declare this is where the line will be drawn? And this is the time to draw it.

[Fresno Bee editorials, Wed., May 30, 2007:](#)

More air board antics

District is on shaky ground with its recent ruling on ag burning.

The Valley air district's governing board voted recently to allow exceptions for some small farmers to a law that bans open field burning. The move sparked outrage among environmentalists and drew the wrath of the legislation's author. And the district appears to be on shaky ground in its rationalization for the vote.

Such exceptions are permitted under the law, SB 705, written by state Sen. Dean Florez and passed in 2003. But they must be approved by the state Air Resources Board. That board's legislative director made it clear, in a letter to Florez, that such concurrence had not been granted. But the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District went ahead and granted the exception anyway, on a 9-1 vote May 17.

Robert P. Oglesby, the state ARB's legislative director, could not have been clearer in his response to Florez's question about the Valley district's action:

"Neither the ARB governing board nor the executive office has received a formal request for concurrence on the district's rule. I am aware that ARB and district technical staff communicated via letter and phone on the various provisions of this rule (SJV Rule 4103) over the course of its development. However, ARB submitted written comments on May 7 that specifically stated that ARB staff comments cannot be construed to be official ARB concurrence," Oglesby wrote.

Tulare County Supervisor J. Steven Worthley, a member of the air district board, offered the rationale that, at the May 17 meeting where the exception was approved, no one objected to moving ahead without ARB's permission. That sounds like an argument that the district isn't obliged to follow the rules unless someone is watching.

The district board either got bad advice from its staff, didn't understand what it was doing or decided to willfully ignore the law. None of those explanations is comforting.

But it fits a pattern. The district's board, dominated by county supervisors with close ties to ag and other industries, has had to be pushed and shoved into making the progress against dirty air that has been achieved.

The same day the air district was flouting the Legislature's intent with SB 705, the state Senate approved a bill that would expand the membership of the district board to include more representatives from Valley cities as well as scientific experts and public members. The district board, jealous of its prerogatives, has fought the idea tooth-and-nail. It's ironic that the district makes the best case for changing the board's makeup when it shoots itself in the foot, as it did when it tried to soften the ban on open-field burning.

Fuel fantasies

Governor needs to face reality when it comes to global warming.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is an exuberant cheerleader for his policies to fight global warming. At times, his exuberance gets the best of him.

A recent example is a speech he delivered to the International Low Carbon Fuel Symposium at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Schwarzenegger claimed that development of ethanol and other biofuels could help reduce gas prices, which now average about \$3.45 a gallon in California.

"The Low Carbon Fuel Standard is our best weapon against rising oil prices and gas prices because a vibrant market in alternative fuels and alternative vehicles, alternative engines, gives customers a great choice," the governor said. "That empowers the customers, of course, to say 'no' to those high fuel prices."

There is little doubt that California and other governments need to explore the potential of alternative vehicles and "biofuels." If manufactured from crops that don't require a large consumption of energy -- forget corn and soybeans -- such fuels could help reduce outputs of carbon dioxide, one of the manmade gases that is contributing to global warming.

It's another thing entirely, however, to suggest that the country can quickly bring down fuel prices by switching to ethanol and other biofuels. No respected economist we know is making that claim, and a review of the basic numbers on fuel production and consumption challenge that very premise.

Currently, the United States consumes about 139 billion gallons of gasoline yearly. Since standard vehicles are currently designed to burn about 10% ethanol in their fuel mix, there now is a market capacity for about 14 billion gallons of ethanol each year.

Even with new ethanol plants under construction, economists say the United States probably won't reach a production level of 14 billion gallons until well after 2010. Even then, ethanol will only provide 10% of the nation's transport fuel needs -- not enough to affect market prices.

Absent the construction of new refineries on the West Coast, the long-term solution to high gas prices is reducing consumption.

That could occur through more efficient vehicles, increased funding for and use of transit and changes in community planning to reduce dependence on the car for every last trip or errand. Cars powered by electricity also will help.

Exuberance is great, but only when it is grounded in reality. The governor needs to get real about the challenges of weaning ourselves from a carbon-based economy.

[Letter to the Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, May 29, 2007:](#)

Counties do their part to preserve farmland

The Governor's budget does not propose to eliminate the Williamson Act as your recent editorial claimed, but instead calls upon local governments to do their part to preserve farmland. These local budgets have seen tremendous growth in property tax revenues in the past decade and are in a better position than the state to continue on this responsibility. The non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office proposed that there are more efficient and effective ways to preserve agricultural land than by state tax incentives.

The governor and his administration support California agriculture and protecting farm land, this is why we strongly support an improvement and augmentation to the conservation titles of the farm bill to [improve air and water quality](#) and enhance the preservation of working lands.

Gov. Schwarzenegger has a strong record of preserving open space, supporting farmers, and being attentive to the interests of California's Central Valley.

The Williamson Act is already responsible for preserving a significant amount California's agricultural land. In making the difficult but fiscally responsible decision to withhold Williamson Act funding, our Administration is not ending those protections, it is instead encouraging local governments to work toward continuing the Act's achievements.

*A.G. KAWAMURA, Secretary
California Department of Food and Agriculture*

[Letters to the Fresno Bee, Wed., May 30, 2007:](#)

Vote against the loop

I have great concerns about the Vision section [May 20] and commentaries in The Bee about this new alleged freeway that will encompass the entire area cutting the beautiful countryside of rural Fresno County. Who is to say that this "population boom" is really going to continue?

I would bet that big land developers and real estate investors will have a feast with this. Anything along this new freeway will likely become prime real estate. That's what will bring this million more people.

What about the countryside, the farms and the rural life that so many enjoy? The air quality would surely suffer even more with this freeway and its million more people driving along it throwing their trash and cigarettes out their windows. A great decline in the quality of life for everyone as the inner city gets ignored and people move out further and further.

I personally don't want a million more people in Fresno or a big new freeway. If I get a vote on this I'll surely go against it. I hope others will too!

Patrick Fort, Fresno

'Attack the messenger'

Victor Davis Hanson is attacking Al Gore and others for being liberal hypocrites for their position on global warming. Dr. Hanson's tactic is to attack the messenger if you disagree with the message. Marginalize the messenger with inflammatory labels, and you can ignore the issue.

Apparently Al Gore and others are hypocrites because they have money, live in big houses and are not perfect role models for their cause. Who could be, other than a homeless person?

Many high-profile people have adopted important causes they promote for humanitarian reasons: Jimmy Carter's work with Habitat for Humanity. Warren Buffet, Bill and Melinda Gates improving health care in the poorest countries. Bono for AIDS causes. All these people have wealth and live in large homes. Are they all hypocrites for their efforts? I think not. Their selfless efforts should be applauded.

Dr. Hanson has done little to enlighten us on the issue of global warming, but much to inflame the issue. Instead of criticizing people who are trying to raise people's awareness of the seriousness of global warming, he should criticize our national leaders for thwarting the real truth about global warming, including rewriting governmental scientific reports.

Harris Hays, Fresno

[Letters to the L.A. Times, Wed., May 30, 2007:](#)

Funds for bullets but not transit

Re "MTA rail projects may not get there despite fare hike," May 26

Sad to see that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's financial troubles continue even after substantial fare hikes. It's worth noting that the MTA's projected \$1.8-billion deficit over the next decade is what we're spending on the Iraq war every five days. The \$100 billion that the Democratic Congress just approved for the war could have been used instead to build world-class public transportation systems in dozens of U.S. cities.

By electing pro-war Republicans and Democrats for office, we effectively choose bombs, bullets and death instead of healthcare and public transportation.

Stacey Bermingham, San Diego

Am I to understand that fully funding a \$10-billion comprehensive capital investment program for commuter light rail in L.A. County to mitigate the area's disastrous traffic and air pollution is "a tough sell" in Congress, but half a trillion dollars for a misbegotten war is no problem?

David Raether, San Marino

Re "High-speed rail network can't be built piecemeal," column, May 28

The contention that the entire \$40-billion California high-speed rail system must be built at the same time shows total ignorance of the technology. Bullet trains run on standard tracks that are exceptionally straight and smooth. However, they can cut their speed and run on existing train lines.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority chose Los Angeles to San Francisco because there is no Amtrak service between the two cities - that's because of an 86-mile gap from Lancaster to Bakersfield. The priority has to be closing this hole, improving adjoining lines and creating a high-speed trunk line from L.A. to San Francisco.

Sacramento and San Diego already have 80-mph Amtrak routes that, with relatively minor improvements, could feed trains into this trunk line, where they can accelerate to 250 mph for the trip through the Central Valley.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority is following the European and Japanese examples of exploiting existing infrastructure and building in fiscally responsible phases.

Evan Carter, Los Angeles

The writer is a member of Friends for High-Speed Rail.

Re "MTA sets sights on Broadway," May 26

Only several days after passing one of the largest fare increases in the last decade, the MTA now wants to fund a project to make a tiny section of downtown into a bus-only type of mall? If the MTA is going to increase fares, can it at least spend the money on projects that make some sort of sense in terms of serving greater public good?

Patrick Morrison, Mount Washington

[Letter to the Contra Costa Times, Wednesday, May 30, 2007:](#)

Chevron lags other oil firms on air quality

People living in poor communities deal with drug activity and violence constantly. Should air quality be another problem these people must live with?

Pollution that Chevron releases into Richmond is rapidly raising the rates of serious respiration problems such as asthma.

Some downplay this problem, but through my research I found shocking results. Ann Song, senior health education specialist for Community Wellness & Prevention Program's (CW&PP) Asthma Project said the average hospitalization rate in Contra Costa County due to asthma is higher than California's state average. It was very obvious to Song the reason the rates are so high is because of companies such as Chevron.

It's possible for Chevron to decrease its pollution output. Many other companies, such as Shell and Conoco Phillips, reduced their pollution output by 15-30 percent.

Just because we cannot charge Chevron with murder of the children and elderly who die yearly of pollution-caused asthma attacks doesn't mean Chevron's not guilty or shouldn't take responsibility.

The air belongs to everyone, not just billionaire CEOs. It is time Richmond took back the healthy air we're entitled to.

Richmond residents, stop sitting around breathing in injustice. It's time to show you care by taking back our air!

Dyani Main, Richmond