

[Fresno Bee editorial, Sunday, Dec. 31, 2006:](#)

It's Valley's year for all seasons

A look back reveals hope, opportunity for coming year.

We're glad, and sometimes mad.

The year 2006 was that kind of time in the Valley, and so we analyze our ups and downs in the annual overview of how we fared in public policy issues. As the proverb goes, there is a time for every season under heaven.

A time to be glad

Healthy foods — Let's start this exercise with a good breakfast. Looking for that caffeine boost from a 20-ounce Coke before facing school each morning? Forget it. Scores of public schools emptied out their vending machines of soda and junk foods following announcements that sugary drinks are a major cause of obesity. The replacements were bottled waters, fruit juices and power drinks. Good show.

Juvenile justice — It was an odd little housewarming, but 330 young people were moved out of juvenile hall, a building some compared to a dog kennel, and into the new \$142 million Juvenile Justice Campus south of Fresno, launching a new era for juvenile justice in Fresno County.

Measure C — Fresno County voters enthusiastically agreed to continue the half-cent sales tax that has funded the transportation grid that we now cannot imagine ourselves without. New money will mean many new jobs and matching transportation funds will pour in from the state. It also will help clean up our filthy air.

Back to schools — Individual students in Valley's schools continued to soar, win awards and make us proud. At Fresno Unified, Superintendent Michael Hanson and the school board continue their reform of what had been one of the state's most dysfunctional districts. Fiscal order is restored, but the solution was not universally loved — see the "mad" list below.

Crime crackdown — The Fresno Police Department has won national recognition for its crackdown on drinking drivers. It got headlines with an aggressive "bar watch" stings, in which suspected drunks were nabbed as they drove off from their favorite bars. Roadside checkpoints are taking drunken drivers off the road before they have a chance to hurt people. A focus on the notorious Bulldog gang also has resulted in scores of arrests.

Get a job — The Regional Jobs Initiative and the Valley's many jobs programs are paying off. Even the governor has jumped in with his partnership initiative. But we still need more opportunities, more incentives for business, more training, more, more more.

The air out there — The Valley's air quality is improving. Smog and coarser particulate pollution have been reduced by more than half since 1990, and the Valley recently met a federal standard for coarse particles — the first time such a goal has been reached.

We are the first region in the nation to regulate emissions from ag operations, including dairies, and to require mitigation for the added pollution created by new development. The Valley air district led the state by voluntarily expanding the Smog Check II program.

Parkway progress — The Valley's natural playground, the San Joaquin River Parkway, opened its newest public access area in June at Sycamore Island Ranch. The property was a missing link in what now is an 800-acre span of protected land on both sides of the river. Even as we write, crews have begun work that will help return the Jensen River Ranch to a more natural environment, with wetlands and valley oaks.

Blog with us — The Bee's Opinion pages began a blog this year called Opinion Talk. It's an interactive discussion about the public policy issues that confront us daily. The blog is getting a lot of traffic on our Web site, www.fresnobeehive.com/opinion/. Jump in and join us.

A time to be mad

School ways — Our children continue to be underserved by Valley school systems. Though most districts are making progress, we still lack the will and skill to address the needs of children growing up in poverty. Fresno Unified has turned a corner, yet there is tension in some quarters, including the teachers union. We remain hopeful the school board, administration, unions and parents can work together to improve this district. But the problems that plague Fresno Unified are occurring in districts throughout the Valley.

Water bottlenecks — Everywhere we turn, we're being faced with water worries. The answer to almost all the questions is yes: Yes to surface storage. Yes to underground storage. Yes to research on new technologies. Yes to much more conservation. The one constant in California is growth and even Bermuda grass cannot grow without water.

Big headaches — The Fresno County Board of Supervisors continues to embarrass itself with its stumbling and bumbling mismanagement of the behavioral health department, particularly mental health. This year continued a slipshod record of budget deficits, overpayments to foster families and even incompetence in scheduling public hearings.

Over at City Hall — There has been progress in some areas, but the City Council and city staff still seem to muff the ball on a lot of important plays. From Herndon Avenue to utility rates, important decisions just don't get made in a timely fashion. The prize in this category is awarded for the city's failure to establish and begin collecting impact fees from developers whose projects increase demand for city services.

Even the developers want such fees, to pay for streets, curbs, gutters, parks and other needs and amenities in their developments — but we still don't have them in place.

Playing games — The growing backlash against gambling tribes seeking to build casinos outside of Indian land is making us all concerned. We support Indian gaming on tribal land in rural areas. But what we are seeing now is a rush to build casinos without regard to their impacts on nearby communities. That must change.

A mixed bag

Parks — We love our parks. The national parks are among the world's most spectacular. Our city parks are havens for families to have fun, but there are not enough of them. And there is ongoing neglect of many of those we have.

Immigration — We still don't have a rational policy in place, and the Valley is hurt by that. We want secure borders and an orderly, legal process for immigration, but we also need a guest-worker program that makes sense — and we need all that soon. There are too many illegal workers here already, and they are too vital to the American economy, for any other solution.

A note of thanks — As we look back on 2006, a year of public policy both good and bad in the Valley, let's put our priorities in order. We would have nothing to examine were it not for the brave men and women who serve in our military forces.

That's a lot of peaks and a lot of valleys in the past year; much to be proud of and much left undone. We'll look ahead at 2007 on tomorrow's editorial page.

In the meantime — Happy New Year!

Burning banned Wednesday in Stanislaus

from Bee Staff Reports

Modesto Bee (online), Tuesday, Jan. 2, 2007, updated at 4:10 P.M.

Stanislaus County residents will not be able to light fireplaces Wednesday.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District predicts that air pollution will reach levels unhealthy for everyone in the county. That means wood-burning fireplaces, fireplace inserts, heating stoves and pellet stoves cannot be used unless they are the only means of heating a house.

Burning will be permitted in San Joaquin and Merced counties, though district officials are discouraging it.

Air pollution today was worse in Stanislaus County than officials had projected.

The district called for residents to avoid lighting fires, which it does when forecasts call for pollution levels unhealthy for sensitive groups such as children, the elderly and people with chronic diseases.

Actual readings, though, showed the pollution reached levels unhealthy for everyone.

Fog leads to fireplace restrictions

Hanford Sentinel, Tuesday, Jan. 2, 2007

FRESNO - Foggy conditions led to the institution of fireplace restrictions parts of the Central Valley by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

The first outright burn bans of the year took place today in the Valley portion of Fresno and Kern counties, meaning no fireplace and wood stove burning was to be allowed through midnight. Kings County and the remainder of the Valley was under voluntary curtailment status, meaning that residents are asked to refrain from burning wood.

The SJVAPCD's Check Before You Burn program runs through Feb. 28. When a mandatory burning ban is in place, the curtailment applies to burning wood, pellets and manufactured firelogs as well as outdoor fire pits and chimneys.

Another Spare the Air tonight

By Dennis Cuff

Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, Jan. 2, 2007

Bay Area residents are asked to minimize driving and not burn wood fires tonight during another Spare the Air Tonight advisory.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District issued the notice today because of predicted unhealthy levels of fine particle pollution.

Smoke from fires and auto exhaust are major sources of the pollution, which can be trapped near ground level during cold weather.

The advisory remains in effect through Wednesday morning.

Spare the Air alert issued for Bay Area tonight

Bay City News

In the Tri-Valley Herald, Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2007

The new year has started off with three consecutive nights of unhealthy nighttime air, according to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, which issued another Spare the Air Tonight alert for the region.

The district has issued alerts every night since Sunday and a total of 14 Spare the Air alerts this season, according to district spokesman Darrell Waller.

A lack of wind or rain, along with the recent introduction of stricter U.S. Environmental Protection Agency air quality standards, has resulted in the large number of nighttime Spare the Air alerts this season.

"We haven't had a lot of rain this season. Last year at this time it seemed like every day there was rain," Waller said.

The district is encouraging residents to avoid burning wood and to limit their driving tonight and Wednesday morning in order to help reduce the air pollution levels.

More information about Spare the Air alerts and reducing air pollution can be obtained by calling 1-800-HELP-AIR or online at <http://www.sparetheair.org>.

Agencies seek rail link across Altamont Pass

By Paul Bugarino, Medianews

Contra Costa Times, Tuesday, Jan. 2, 2007

A conglomerate of public agencies in the Bay Area and Northern San Joaquin Valley is working to create a railway through the Altamont Pass from the Port of Oakland to Stanislaus County that would benefit commerce for the long haul.

The rail link would bring freight containers from ships at the Oakland port to the Stanislaus County-owned Crows Landing Air Facility, where they could be loaded onto trucks or other railways for distribution up and down the Central Valley. In the reverse direction, the rail service could take containers of agricultural products from the Valley back to the port.

"To be able to export California's agriculture from the heartland right to the port and overseas will be tremendous," said Maryline Sandifur, spokeswoman for the Port of Oakland.

Once the rail corridor is established, commuter rail service also could be extended from the Bay Area into Stanislaus County.

The railroad is part of a vast network that moves cargo throughout the county.

"It's a very comprehensive program. It's not just this area -- none of the railways are isolated," Sandifur said. "We have to look at the big picture and make changes now to be prepared for the future."

A study conducted earlier in the year on implementation of the plan suggests that formation of a Joint Powers Authority similar to how the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission operates the Altamont Commuter Service, or ACE train, would be the best way to keep all parties, including the railroads, committed to the endeavor.

The rail link has been in discussions for about 10 months, as groups such as the Port of Oakland; Alameda, San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties; Altamont Commuter Express Rail Service and Capital Corridor train service; and Alameda County Congestion Management have been devising the plan. The group is preparing an application for the recently approved California infrastructure bonds, while seeking funding from other sources.

"The rail link planning is definitely in its infancy stages," said Manteca Councilman John Harris, a member of San Joaquin Council of Governments Board of Directors.

"As it is right now, the amount of railways aren't at the level needed to provide for trade in the future, and we have to work toward changes now," Sandifur said.

Will Ridder, a regional planner for the San Joaquin County of Governments, the county's transportation planning agency says the plan would have a variety of benefits for the San Joaquin region, including diverting the amount of truck traffic on Interstate 205 and on the Altamont.

"There will also be a great benefit to the region's air quality, because traffic won't be stuck on congested highways as much," he said. "It has the potential for quite a bit of benefits."

"We have to do something. You can only expand the freeways so wide. Securing other modes of transportation is vital," Harris said, adding that the projected population growth in the region is "mind-boggling."

The Port of Oakland is definitely interested in the project, Sandifur said, because linking inland distribution centers would attract "first port of call" business, which is more lucrative than if a ship stops at another port like Los Angeles or Long Beach.

Studies on the movement of goods between the Port of Stockton and Port of Oakland have been discussed since 2003, with the emphasis on decreasing truck traffic on I-580 over the Altamont Pass and stimulating the San Joaquin Valley economy. The study team explored the economic and economic sustainability of moving goods between the Central Valley and Port of Oakland via a railroad container shuttle.

In February 2005, the Stockton and Oakland ports entered into a cooperative agreement with the San Joaquin Council of Governments to develop and document a demonstration and long-term implementation plan for a rail shuttle system to connect the Port of Oakland with freight hubs in the San Joaquin Valley.

Reactions about the current plans being discussed have been mixed with Stanislaus County officials, as some county supervisors are concerned about the apparent lack of interest railroad companies have shown.

Bay Area News Roundup

Bay City News Report

S.F. Chronicle, Tuesday, January 2, 2007

The Sierra Club and two citizens' groups have asked a federal appeals court in San Francisco to overturn a government finding that the San Joaquin Valley has met clean air standards for a type of particle pollution.

The environmental group, the Latino Issues Forum and Medical Advocates for Healthy Air filed the lawsuit against the Environmental Protection Agency in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Dec. 27.

The case concerns tiny particles of dust and soot and liquid droplets known as PM 10, which are between 2.5 and 10 microns in size. They are caused by activities including agricultural burning and dust on rural roads.

The EPA has said that the particles can reach the deepest regions of the lungs and are linked to "a variety of significant health problems" ranging from asthma and premature death in people with heart and lung disease.

The lawsuit challenges an EPA finding in October that the valley had met federal standards for particle pollution.

The suit says that data from monitors last Sept. 22 in the southern region of the valley shows that the air pollution problem continues.

Sierra Club attorney Paul Cort said, "At stake here is the health of valley residents and whether or not the EPA and the air pollution control district are going to try to reduce pollution in the district."

But Scott Nester, planning director for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, said the agency believes the Sept. 22 pollution was caused by wildfires and windblown dust and was thus not within the jurisdiction of the Clean Air Act.

Nester said the district has many controls on agricultural operations and agricultural and fireplace burning to reduce pollution in the valley.

But "sometimes Mother Nature overwhelms our controls," Nester said.

The district regulates air pollution in eight counties from San Joaquin County on the north to part of Kern County on the south.

Cort estimated that it could be a year or more before the appeals court rules on the lawsuit.

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Sunday, Dec. 31, 2006:](#)

City's fast growth concerns rural folks

By Robert Price

The perpetual struggle between the charm of farm-town life and the inevitability of our big-city future plays out on all sorts of battlefields: water, roads, fire protection, traffic congestion, air pollution and commute distances.

But more quietly, just ahead of the advance of the construction crews and real-estate agents, there's something else at work. Something nagging, something sad.

Peggy Heathcott called last week to try to express it. She'd been troubled by the Kern County Board of Supervisors' looming vote to lower the allowable density of large animals on so-called rural homesteads. The supervisors were considering a plan to allow one such animal per one-third-acre parcel -- primarily horses, cows, pigs and goats -- rather than the more permissive standard of one animal per quarter acre that exists now.

For Heathcott, who over the years has seen the city of Bakersfield rise on the eastern horizon of her property like a slow-motion tsunami, it was just too much.

"It's going to touch and change so many lives," said Heathcott, who keeps three horses -- family members, really -- at her place on Enos Lane.

Bakersfield's rural tradition isn't getting its due, she believes, and many seem to agree. They descended on the supervisors' meeting earlier this month in sufficient numbers, and spoke with sufficient urgency, to persuade the board to table the idea for the time being. No date has been set to bring it back.

Heathcott, a retired teacher who now keeps most of her horses on a ranch in Texas, isn't troubled simply by the fact horse lovers and 4-H kids would be hurt or inconvenienced by a more restrictive ordinance. She is worried about what the further erosion of Bakersfield's rural character will mean to the way we treat each other.

"When I was (visiting) in San Diego, it seemed like nobody looks you in the eye, nobody holds a door," she said. "Here people look at you, they speak to you -- even the young ones. There's still this great sense of togetherness. There's still a community spirit, still some life. This is still a pleasant place to live unless it's 106 degrees."

But development means jobs, and growth fuels the economy. Like it or not, it's coming, and we've got to have places to put these people. Few want to live next door to the odor and pre-dawn activity of farms -- large farms in particular but also smaller ones. It makes sense for local government to gradually push those homesteaders away from the city's ever-reaching suburban tentacles.

But it doesn't make sense to apply a broad brush to the situation. Less restrictive limits on large animals are logical, even on smaller parcels, where city encroachment is unlikely. But in areas within the confines of the 2010 Plan, it's another story.

That's only realistic.

Heathcott, for one, can accept that. Not that it makes her happy. Or should.

"I just see a way of life dying for the benefit of developers," she said. "We don't have the infrastructure to support all this growth. We've got all this leapfrogging (of developments), and this loss of farmland.

"But the biggest thing is, it's not good for the soul of a county. And limiting our horses and sheep - - well, that's just another step in that direction."

As much as it might pain Heathcott and the horse lovers who share her sentiments, it still seems like an inevitable step. The rest of us -- rural or suburban -- can only hope it doesn't detract further from the little bit of civility we've got left.

[Contra Costa Times commentary, Saturday, Dec. 30, 2006:](#)

That cozy fire isn't s comfy after all

Wood smoke leads to particle pollution, which leads to lung disease , heart attacks and strokes – with children most at risk.

By Jenny Bard, From The Community

IS THERE ANY SIGHT more comforting on a cold winter evening than a roaring fireplace?

According to recent scientific studies, we should be anything but comforted: Wood smoke, we now know, is hazardous to our health.

Burning wood creates significant amounts of fine particle pollution. The more scientists have learned about particle pollution, the more alarmed they have become.

Thousands of studies link particle pollution with a host of health problems that include asthma attacks, diminished lung function, respiratory ailments, heart attacks and stroke. While particle pollution affects everyone, it is particularly dangerous for children -- whose lungs are still developing -- and can cause bronchitis, increases in respiratory infections and impaired lung development.

These are just a few of the reasons the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency now considers fine particle pollution its "most pressing air quality problem."

If you're skeptical that smoke from fireplaces and wood stoves could actually be a significant source of air pollution, consider this: According to the California Air Resources Board, residential wood burning is the single biggest contributor to winter particle pollution in the Bay Area, contributing more particle pollution to our air than automobiles, diesel vehicles or industry.

Last December, the air quality in the Bay Area exceeded the recently enacted EPA particle pollution standard on one out of every three days, largely because of wood burning.

It would be bad enough if the story ended here, but it doesn't. Wood smoke also contains toxic and carcinogenic substances that include benzene, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and dioxin. According to the Bay Area Air Quality Management Agency, one-third of the total amount of dioxin in the area comes from wood burning.

It may seem hard to believe that something so familiar could actually be harmful to our health. But just watch a movie from the 1940s, and you'll realize that cigarette smoking was also once considered harmless, and just as ubiquitous, as wood burning is today. EPA researchers estimate that the cancer risk from wood smoke may be 12 times greater than from an equal amount of tobacco smoke.

The hazardous particles from wood smoke are so tiny that they can easily infiltrate homes. While we may have effectively banned tobacco smoke from our public places, there is currently no way to avoid something potentially far more dangerous right at home.

Every winter, local offices of the American Lung Association receive phone calls from distraught families suffering from health problems caused by wood burning. Often, they have young children with asthma who are literally unable to breathe in their own homes. Some of these families have had to resort to selling their houses and moving to areas with less wood-smoke pollution.

Fortunately, there are easily available solutions. Gas fireplaces now so convincingly imitate their log-burning brethren that it is difficult to tell them apart -- and gas is far more convenient and cleaner-burning. Gas-burning "woodstoves" can be inserted into fireplaces, and they put out a small fraction of the particle pollution of those that burn wood. Electric models offer amazing realism. If gas is not an option, pellet stoves deliver high overall efficiency and burn relatively cleanly. With improved woodstove combustion technologies, some newer stoves have certified emissions as low as pellet stoves.

The American Lung Association of California is working with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District to promote the cleanest burning options and to enact effective measures to protect the public from wood smoke pollution. The health of our community depends on it.

But the most important change we can make is in our collective attitude toward wood-burning. This will be difficult, since it has been engrained in human behavior ever since our ancestors first gathered around a fire in a dark cave.

The first step is for us to stop associating that roaring fire with ambience and romance and start linking it with an asthmatic child reaching desperately for his inhaler.

Bard is director of clean air programs at the American Lung Association of California in Santa Rosa.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2007:](#)

Clean city plus smart city adds up to 'good city'

My thanks to Bill McEwen for his column [Dec. 26] and his work on the Fourth Saturday Tower Beautification. His presence was a boost to morale two days before Christmas, picking up trash from curbs and bushes.

And do I think "a clean city is a good city"? Yes, not only for not wading in litter, but more for what it implies, that we are a "thinking city."

And while cleaning what should never have hit the ground, we are thinking about respect for all persons in our fair town, about how we see ourselves and each other. We are thinking about clean air, unpolluted water, health giving food, affordable shelter, fair wages, good education and equal justice. We have a long list to think about while we clean.

So what? So cleaning is a symbol, but admittedly not a substitute for action in all these areas.

That's the big picture I see for our Fresno: Clean, yes, but smart enough to work also for clean air, water, food, shelter and the other makings of a "good city."

*Gay Claire Amend, Coordinator
Fourth Saturday Tower Beautification, Fresno*