

Plans target smog belchers

Lawmaker offers bill to get polluting cars off the road.

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau

Monday, March 26, 2007

If you drive a high-polluting car, you might soon be able to replace it -- for free.

State Sen. Dave Cogdill is pushing a plan to allow residents to exchange old cars for cleaner-burning ones, with the supply coming from donations.

Cogdill, R-Modesto, is promoting Senate Bill 23 as an alternative to a San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District plan that would give owners up to \$5,000 apiece to scrap their old cars.

Cogdill favors his program because he says it would cost less.

"It should be given a fair trial before we start spending limited resources to try to address the problem," he said.

District officials support Cogdill's proposal and say the plans are complementary.

"We don't see any conflict between our proposals and his," said Tom Jordan, special projects administrator for the district.

The ideas come as the district seeks approval for a plan to clear smog from the Valley, one of the most polluted regions in the country. The problem is so intractable, officials say, that it will take until 2024 to clean the air, long past the current 2013 cleanup deadline.

Pollution-belching cars account for a significant chunk of the problem. The dirtiest cars, known as gross polluters, represent about 10% of all cars on the road but account for half of all car-generated pollution.

SB 23 has a goal of replacing 200 gross-polluting cars in the San Joaquin Valley, though Cogdill hopes to expand the program if the first phase is successful.

Under the plan, residents whose cars fail the state smog check could apply for a car donated by someone else. Priority would be given to low-income residents. The program would be managed by the air district.

Cogdill pushed a similar bill last year, but it died in committee at the end of the session. A hearing on SB 23 is scheduled for Tuesday.

If the bill passes, success could depend on the interpretation of a new tax law.

As of 2005, residents donating cars can only deduct the amount a charity receives for the sale of the car. Previously, donors could write off the fair market value of the car, regardless of how much the charity sold it for.

Cogdill hopes that under his program, the Internal Revenue Service would allow donors to write off the entire car value, because technically, the district would not be reselling it.

Existing vehicle replacement programs are ineffective, he said. Under a statewide program, residents who fail the smog test can scrap their cars in return for \$1,000. But that's not enough money, Cogdill said.

"The reality is people can't accept that, because they can't replace a vehicle" [for \$1,000], he said.

In 2005-06, residents turned in 15,445 vehicles statewide, according to the Department of Consumer Affairs, which runs the program.

Under the district plan, officials would identify the worst polluters by combing through smog-testing records. Owners would be sent letters and invited to have their car emissions tested.

If the car is found to be a high-polluting vehicle, owners would have the option of taking \$5,000 toward the purchase of a new car. To make sure the money is used correctly, it might be sent directly to a dealer -- though details such as this still are being worked out.

Even if an owner passes the test, he or she would still have the option of taking \$1,000 in return for giving up the car, which would be crushed.

Vehicles targeted for the program include those that might have failed the biennial smog test but have been repaired.

"A lot of those cars, even if they have been repaired, fall back into disrepair," said Todd DeYoung, a supervising air quality specialist with the district.

The district proposes to retire 33,000 passenger cars through the program.

The \$2 million first phase, which the district board recently authorized, calls for crushing 600 cars in the upcoming fiscal year, DeYoung said. It would be paid for from fees residents already pay when registering vehicles.

Les Clark Jr. honored for work on Industry board

Taft Midway Driller, Friday, March 23, 2007 (1:18 p.m.)

Les Clark, a long-time icon of the Kern County oil industry was recognized for his many years of leadership as chairman of the Citizens Advisory Group of Industry (CAGI) in February.

Clark has served as CAGI Chairman for more than a decade and is known by many as the "Godfather of Air Quality in the San Joaquin Valley." He was honored in a presentation made by incoming CAGI Chairman Roger Isom, of the California Cotton Ginners and Growers Associations. Isom presented Clark with a crystal plaque and gavel, and commented that despite tremendous obligations, and numerous adversities, "Les has served as chairman in an outstanding, unselfish, dedicated and tireless manner".

Clark is currently Executive Vice President of the Independent Oil Producers Agency and has served in that capacity for the past 27 years. Clark has participated on numerous boards and committees related to air quality, including serving as the "Industry Representative for Kern County" on the Citizen's Advisory Committee to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. Clark also serves on the Policy

Committee to the Central California Ozone Study and the California Regional Particulate Matter Air Quality Study. Clark is also extremely active in numerous committee and efforts throughout Kern County including the Kern County Fair Board, the Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce, Kern County Farm Bureau and many, many others.

The CAGI is an organization of businesses and trade associations formed to address air quality issues and their impacts on industry in the San Joaquin Valley. Formed in 1992, the CAGI meets on a bi-monthly basis to address upcoming air quality issues at the local, state and federal level. The organization currently has over 40 members representing over 3,000 businesses, manufacturing plants, processors and farms throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

Groups file to have air finding rescinded

Tulare Advance-Register, Friday, March 23, 2007

Environmental and community groups filed a petition Thursday with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency asking the government to withdraw their finding that air quality in the San Joaquin Valley met federal standards for airborne dust, smoke and soot.

In October, the agency found the Valley's air was no longer polluted by PM-10 - minute pollution particles that can cause lung and heart disease - because it hadn't violated the PM-10 standard in three years.

Environmentalists said data from monitors in the Valley's southern edge showed the air had high levels of PM-10 in September and October 2006, so the agency should withdraw the finding.

Legislators target bonds-package billions

Bills seek to have public works funds spent on favored projects, issues.

By Jim Sanders - Bee Capitol Bureau
Sacramento Bee, Monday, March 26, 2007

Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Atwater, whose bill seeks to protect communities that flooded last year, talks to reporters after meeting with the governor earlier this month on how to spend state bond funds. Sacramento Bee/Brian Baer

A modern-day Gold Rush has erupted over \$43 billion targeted for California public works projects, with legislators crafting dozens of bills to affect how the money is spent.

Voter passage of the record bond package last November has spawned a frenzy in which communities and their officeholders are fighting for a piece of the massive pot.

"It's kind of like the heirs to the estate of some very wealthy person," said Darry Sragow, a Democratic strategist. "People fight over money -- and they fight especially hard over a lot of money."

More than 50 bond-related bills have been introduced, including some by legislators who want to steer money toward specific projects or key problems in their own districts, including:

- Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Atwater, whose Senate Bill 424 would commit \$1.4 million to Stanislaus County and \$15 million to Merced County to protect communities that flooded last year.
- Assemblyman Juan Arambula, D-Fresno, whose Assembly Bill 575 would designate at least \$300 million apiece to two air quality districts -- in San Joaquin Valley and Southern California -- with major smog problems.
- Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, whose Senate Bill 240 would commit \$50 million annually for the next six years to fight diesel truck emissions in the San Joaquin Valley.

Voters set aside specific sums for transportation, flood control, education, affordable housing and other needs, but state politicians or bureaucrats ultimately must decide which projects to bless, dump or delay.

"There are an infinite number of ways to spend all this money," Sragow said. "There's never enough money."

Some new bills aim to siphon money from one potential use to another, such as proposing to make port security or dam construction or energy conservation projects a priority.

Other measures tackle major public policy issues to lay a foundation for funding, such as whether growth areas should receive priority for levee projects or whether landowners should help pay for flood-control work.

Assemblyman Sandré Swanson, D-Alameda, has proposed Assembly Bill 655 to give an edge in obtaining bond contracts to small businesses in economically disadvantaged areas and to contractors who hire residents of low-income neighborhoods.

"I don't see it as a social handout, I see this as an economic investment in California's future that broadens the stakeholders," Swanson said.

Kevin Spillane, a GOP strategist, said politicians could sour prospects for future bond measures if they get greedy or attach too many strings.

"They can't resist the temptation," he said. "Ultimately, they're going to end up hurting themselves and the state."

But Arambula cautioned against jumping to conclusions, saying his bill to steer money to specific air quality districts was strategic, not selfish.

His goal "is to make sure we have a seat at the table when those decisions are made," he said.

Lobbyists are counting on a windfall from intense jockeying over bond funds.

"I think it's safe to say that there's money being spent, and there's probably a great deal more money to be spent as the bonds are let and the monies become available," said Don Burns, a veteran lobbyist. "There's no question but that it does spawn a lot of activity."

Legislative leaders and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vow the \$43 billion will not get tangled in special-interest politics.

"The people upheld their end of the bargain -- they voted to support these bonds," said H.D. Palmer, Schwarzenegger's finance spokesman. "The governor believes very strongly that it's incumbent upon us -- the Legislature and the administration -- to uphold our end of the bargain."

Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, an Oakland Democrat who helped lead last year's campaign for the bond package, said it is vital to adopt funding guidelines and criteria. But pork-barrel bills will die, he said.

"When someone comes in and says, 'I've got 22 acres and I want to turn it into a park in my district' -- no, that's not going to happen," Perata said.

Manteca seeks plan for future

County workshops gather ideas on growth

By Paul Burgarino, STAFF WRITER
Tri-Valley Herald, Sunday, March 25, 2007

MANTECA — About two dozen residents gathered Wednesday night at the Manteca Library concerned about the hand that may be dealt by future development in the region.

Representing a diverse range of ages, genders and professions, the residents engaged in an interactive discussion and thought-generating session as part of the San Joaquin County Blueprint Project.

The San Joaquin Valley Blueprint Planning Process is an undertaking by the eight counties that make up the Valley to address growth issues in the central core of California for the next 40 years. The plan is funded by a \$4 million state grant over a two-year period.

At the county level, the San Joaquin Council of Governments is leading the charge — conducting community workshops throughout March.

Projections suggest the population of San Joaquin County is expected to double by 2030, serving as a warning to the county that it will have to cushion such change.

The idea of the discussions are to "support, not supersede" plans that government agencies are making, said Michael Swearingen, a regional planner with the Council of Governments.

"The idea is to get input on what are your concerns about where we're going to grow, how we're going to grow, travel through the region. These are all things we need to start looking at," he said.

City Manager Bob Adams told residents the planning ties into Manteca's efforts to stimulate the long-term economic vitality of the city and region.

Residents split into two smaller groups, in which they outlined what they like and dislike about the area, as well as what an ideal Manteca would look like in 2050.

The second part of the exercise included a card game in which residents had to rank the degree of change they wanted to see in such areas as agriculture, housing, air quality, economic development and urban growth.

One group, which included farmer Art Nunes Jr., local business owner Ricardo Cuevas and his daughter, University of Pacific freshman Kyle Low, and residents Tom Wilson, Joseph De Angelis and Linda Albedt, generally felt it was important to maintain a balance of agriculture land and separation between the communities. That would be accomplished by constructing town centers.

With that would come the need for more transit options. Low, a Fremont resident, suggested a mass-transit system like BART coming to San Joaquin County.

Housing affordability and the balance between jobs and housing were problematic issues.

Resident Wendy Benavides said she was surprised the two groups had differing opinions, as her group desired a more drastic change.

"The difference was pretty amazing," she said.

Meetings have been held throughout the county this month and a meeting will be held in Tracy at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday at the Tracy Community Center.

Results of this month's meetings will be presented to the local and regional committees. A second set of workshops will ask residents what sort of growth they want to see and different scenarios for the year 2050.

Organizers say information from the workshops will be made public and distributed to local leaders as a guide for future decision-making as early as June 2008.

Group wants air ruling changed

Stockton Record, Friday, March 23, 2007

Conservationists are petitioning the federal government to change its ruling that the San Joaquin Valley has met particulate matter standards.

The EPA said in October that the Valley had not violated the standard since 2003, allowing it to comply with federal rules that require three years of clean air. The government called it a "significant achievement" for the Valley's notoriously foul air.

But the environmental group Earthjustice says the government reached its conclusion by "sweeping key data under the rug." Last fall, southern portions of the Valley violated the limit more than two dozen times, the group says.

Earthjustice on Thursday filed a petition to withdraw the EPA's ruling.

Massive tire-fire site deemed safe

Patterson mayor welcomes news of inferno's cleanup

By MICHAEL G. MOONEY

Modesto Bee, Saturday, March 24, 2007

Nearly eight years after lightning ignited 7 million illegally dumped tires, the canyon near Westley where the inferno once raged has been declared safe to inhabit.

"With the environmental cleanup complete at the Westley tire site, the property no longer presents a threat to human health or the environment," said Maureen Gorsen, director of the state Department of Toxic Substances Control. "What it presents now is an opportunity at economic development and revitalization that can benefit local residents and businesses."

Gorsen made the comments in a statement issued earlier this week by the California Environmental Protection Agency.

Patterson Mayor Becky Campo welcomed the news Friday, saying she hoped West Side residents finally can put the disaster behind them.

"It was a serious issue for all the communities around here," Campo said, "with very serious health and environmental implications."

The fire erupted in September 1999, setting ablaze a massive pile of more than 7 million tires at Oxford Tire Recycling Inc.

Flames from the fire released smoke and pollutants into the air while leaving behind ash, debris and oil waste.

Those and other pollutants contaminated soil and groundwater.

Campo said her son was among those who fell ill as the fire raged, but apparently suffered no long-term health effects.

"My son was attending Grayson School at the time," Campo said. "I took him to the doctor. He had an irritated throat and nose. He's OK now."

Others living or working near the burning tires weren't so lucky and sustained long-term health problems.

While the physical cleanup of the site was completed by the end of 2002, soil and groundwater testing remained in place for another three-plus years.

By the fall of 2006, the final site cleanup report was issued.

Can't pile tires there anymore

Three state agencies — Integrated Waste Management Board, Department of Toxic Substances Control, and the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board — reviewed and signed off on the report.

The agencies worked together closely on the \$20 million cleanup.

The Integrated Waste Management Board spearheaded the removal of 300,000 tons of fire-contaminated soil and debris, as well as the removal of more than 800,000 unburned tires.

That's a lot of debris, according to Jim Tjosvold, chief of the Northern California central cleanup and operations branch for the state Department of Toxic Substances.

Tjosvold said 300,000 tons is enough to fill about 15,000 dump trucks.

That debris, which included partially burned tires, was taken to other landfills around the state.

The land, owned by the Filbin Family Trust, according to state officials, suffered no long-term effects and carries no restrictions — other than the prohibition against piling any more tires there.

Ultimately, property owners and businesses connected to the nearby waste-to-energy facility were found liable in a 2000 civil lawsuit brought by the state, for conditions that contributed to the fire.

Eventually, the state recovered \$11 million in cleanup costs from the responsible parties, including Ed and Mary Filbin.

"The return of this site to productive use is a credit to the cooperative efforts of our Cal/EPA team," said Cal/EPA Secretary Linda Adams in a statement released Thursday.

"Restoring this site to residential levels demonstrates the state's commitment to the surrounding community."

Patterson Mayor Campo said she hopes the state agencies responsible for the cleanup did a complete and thorough job.

"I'm glad it's over and done with," she said. "And I hope they will take steps to ensure that something like this never happens again."

For now, it's a city only in his eyes

He's never built a thing, but W. Quay Hays aims to turn 12,000 acres of San Joaquin Valley dirt into a model municipality.

By Gary Polakovic, Times Staff Writer
L.A. Times, Monday, March 26, 2007

Standing in an empty field in southern Kings County facing the horizon, W. Quay Hays enthusiastically surveys the land — stark and featureless except for two newly planted redwood trees.

This desolate patch of San Joaquin Valley real estate along Interstate 5 is the spot Hays has chosen to pursue his vision for a new city: a utopia of 150,000 people living in a solar-powered, self-contained community rising from the dirt flats about 50 miles north of Bakersfield.

"This is perfect," says Hays, a Pacific Palisades entrepreneur turned developer. "It's halfway between two world-class cities in San Francisco and Los Angeles. It's beside a major highway, it has power lines, and the land" is cheap.

Even in a state built on big development dreams, Hays' proposed Quay Valley Ranch project boggles the mind. It would be built from scratch on 12,000 acres stretching about five miles along the interstate, just north of the Kern County line.

About 50,000 houses and condominiums would be constructed in a village-like matrix with parks, offices and retail centers, and anchored by four "town centers." Houses would be equipped with "smart technology" and new energy-efficient building materials.

No one would pay electric bills because solar power — including three 100-acre solar arrays — would produce 600 megawatts of power, enough to supply the city and export power to Pacific Gas & Electric Co. for use elsewhere in California.

People could commute to jobs via water taxi, plying a 300-foot-wide stream meandering about eight miles through groves and neighborhoods. The community would include a theme park, a convention center, a racetrack, an auto mall, industrial land, farms, houses, schools and a medical center.

Hays' Kings County Ventures LLC submitted a development application in October and plans to deliver a more detailed proposal next month. The project would be built in phases over 25 years, financed largely by commercial and residential developers working as partners and paying as they go.

Costs could reach \$25 billion. Hays said building could begin as early as next year, though officials say that seems ambitious for such a large-scale project that is likely to face strong opposition from environmentalists and others concerned about increased traffic and pollution in the smoggy valley.

Carol Whiteside, president of the Great Valley Center, a think tank in Modesto, said such massive "leapfrog" development would only create more sprawl in the San Joaquin Valley, expected to grow from 4 million residents today to more than 5.4 million in 2025. She said new development should be concentrated in or near metropolitan areas, such as Fresno and Bakersfield.

"The issue for the valley is, what's the strategy for growth? Are we going to build in existing cities or make new cities?" Whiteside said. "We try to do everything at once, we get stalled and the result is we get lots of suburban cities and not much sustaining economic center."

But Hays is undeterred. He says that what he wants to create is different, a self-sufficient and environmentally sensitive city, one that manages its own water, provides its own electricity and generates its own jobs.

"I want to see if we can reinvent the way development is done," Hays says. "If we can, we will blaze a path for everyone who comes after us. A town like this has to happen in California."

Challenges loom

Much of California and the West is built on grandiose dreams of outsized development. Hays is just the latest visionary.

In Southern California, Los Angeles-area growth is increasingly spreading north into canyon lands, over the Tehachapi Mountains and into the San Joaquin Valley. Each of those projects has drawn intense opposition from environmentalists.

Newhall Land and Farming Co.'s plan to build a 20,000-home development north of Santa Clarita was stalled by a lawsuit over water rights and other issues. The company has modified its plan, won some court battles and plans to begin building the first phase in 2009.

Farther north, on Tejon Ranch, 23,000 new homes are proposed for a new town called Centennial, near the junction of I-5 and California 138. An additional 3,450 estate homes and a resort and golf course called Tejon Mountain Village are planned near Lebec. Environmentalists argue that the two projects imperil wilderness and the California condor, an endangered species.

John M. Quigley, director of the Housing and Urban Policy program at UC Berkeley, said the task of building a new city is daunting. He said such projects are rare and tend to work when sustained by abundant natural resources or when built next to existing urban centers.

"There was a time about 25 years ago when a lot of attention was paid to building new cities in the United States, but most of them did not succeed," Quigley said. "It's difficult to pull off because the logistical and coordination aspects are enormous and the capital costs are huge. If I were an investor, I'd look at this very carefully."

One of the biggest challenges facing Quay Valley Ranch is providing enough water to sustain a new city.

Mike Nordstrom, a Corcoran-based attorney hired to examine water supply issues for the ranch project, said it would require about 22,000 to 25,000 acre-feet of water annually. (An acre-foot is 325,821 gallons, roughly enough water to supply two families for a year.) He said water rights for at least that amount are available from the adjoining Liberty Ranch farm, which Kings County Ventures has secured the option to purchase.

He said streams and reservoirs created in the community would allow flexibility to meet water demands. The developers say conservation measures, including the use of large solar panels to shield ponds and reduce evaporation, would result in 66% less water consumption than in a typical similar-sized community.

To accomplish his vision, Hays has hired an impressive team of managers and consultants, including Jonathan Kieswetter, a partner in Kings County Ventures and president of Orange County real estate finance company Grace Capital Group; master planner Ken Brindley, who was on the team that built the Orange County planned community of Rancho Santa Margarita; and Vince Barabba, former director of the U.S. Census Bureau and head of corporate strategy for General Motors.

Hays and his team have received a favorable reception in Kings County. If the project is completed, it will double the current population of about 143,000.

County planning director Bill Zumwalt said his office has hired four new contractors to help review the massive project. The proposal is so new that it's too early to answer questions about potential environmental effects, Zumwalt said.

"We're talking about going from nothing to a new city," he said. "It's very challenging."

Certainly, Quay Valley Ranch would offer amenities that Kings County officials desire.

Other than farming, the county has three state prisons and Chemical Waste Management Inc.'s hazardous-waste site near Kettleman Hills. The unemployment rate hovers at 8.3%, nearly twice the statewide average.

Kettleman Hills — population 1,400 — is the nearest town, about two miles west of where Quay Valley Ranch would be built. It's a pit stop on I-5, and a few of the people walking in and out of the town post office recently said they were excited about Hays' project.

Maurice D'Souza, 58, a gas station manager who lives near Kettleman Hills, gestured to the vast emptiness of the valley and said: "Look at this. There's no life, it's the end of civilization. I think [Quay Valley Ranch] is great. It will be good for business."

Hays said Kings County Ventures has reached an agreement with Arizona-based RED Development Inc. to build a 1.8-million-square-foot open-air mall at Quay Valley Ranch. The developers are also talking with Cal State Fresno about building a satellite campus or research center.

Once the project gets the green light, Hays said, it will be easier to attract businesses and industries.

But Whiteside, of the Great Valley Center, is unconvinced. Sustaining a vision and long-term financing for such an ambitious project will be extremely difficult, she said.

What kind of community is left if the money runs out? Or if developers tire of the project and move on?

"If the vision fades away, we get subdivisions without jobs and incomplete neighborhoods," Whiteside said. "It happens all the time."

Promoting his dream

Gazing out at the flatland, Hays, 50, outfitted in leather jacket, alligator skin cowboy boots and jeans braced by an oversize belt buckle, is enthralled by his dream for the new city — even though he's not a developer and has never built anything.

Promotions and marketing are his business. And he's good at it.

He came to Los Angeles from Florida in the early 1980s and worked in the marketing department for the Pantages and Greek concert theaters before moving over to KROQ-FM (106.7) as marketing director.

Hays eventually launched a successful book publishing company, Santa Monica-based General Publishing Group, in 1992.

"I always liked ink on paper," he said. "I saw it as a way to change the world."

Hays saw a niche in the competitive field and rapidly grew his company into one of the most successful book publishers in the nation during the 1990s. He did it by making slick, coffee-table books featuring Hollywood and pop culture titles, including: "Frank Sinatra, An American Legend" and "The Playboy Book: Forty Years."

After his book publishing business folded in 1999 due to competition from discount retailers, Hays joined RKO Pictures and formed Idiom Films and Entertainment, where he worked for a time to secure financing for films.

"I've been in many businesses," he said. "The common thread is business development. I am always looking for a way to see if we can do something better."

His latest venture into real estate development is no different.

"We've been building homes the same way for a 100 years," Hays said. "I feel that housing development can be improved, taking everything we know about development and making it better."

The first few spadefuls of dirt have already been turned at the Quay Valley Ranch site. The two large redwood trees were recently planted next to an excavated pit where a pond is planned beside a new visitors center.

"Nothing like this has been done before," Hays said. "It's not often you get to build a town from the ground up. We intend to do it right."

Big plans

Developers want to build Quay Valley Ranch, a new town beside Interstate 5 about 50 miles north of Bakersfield.

The vision

150,000 to 200,000 residents

50,000 new homes

12,000 acres

100% solar power

A 42,000-seat stock-car arena

An auto museum

500 acres of ponds & waterways

\$10 billion to \$25 billion to complete

Sources: Kings County Ventures; Kings County Planning Department

Looking More Like a Drought

Valley Voice Newspaper (Visalia, CA)
Monday, March 26, 2007

Tulare County - These 80 degree days in March are telling us something. Continued high pressure on the West Coast may be great for suntans and wearing shorts, but for all of us who depend on winter rains "you can just about count this season out" shrugs Porterville weathercaster John Hibler.

Other experts agree. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released their spring outlook last week.

Much of southern California just experienced its driest fall and winter in more than a century. "With the dry season fast approaching, there are major concerns that drought conditions will not only fail to improve but actually worsen in coming months," said Doug Lecomte, drought specialist for the NOAA Climate Prediction Center. "The outlook for any significant drought improvement from now through spring looks grim for not only southern California but for much of the Southwest as well."

The prediction outlook released by the agency shows the likelihood of persistent drought in the US Southwest.

Hibler says this week's storm didn't offer much precipitation and will likely be followed by a continued buildup of high pressure over the next few weeks and continued above normal temps. These temps tend to dry things out pushing more use of groundwater to satisfy plant demand.

"The warm weather is causing" trees to bloom like crazy and farmers are experiencing a tremendous demand for irrigation at a time when we usually build up more water resources," says Friant Water board member Dennis Keller. "We are heading in the opposite direction from where we need to be."

A "perfect" spring bloom season will likely mean a big crop of tree fruit and nuts—an early boost in demand for irrigation for as long as there is water. Irrigation demand late in the season will now have to come from groundwater pumping costing farmers and cities more.

The poor snow season has been lousy for ski lodges and now a short season runoff will dampen enthusiasm on the Kaweah and Kings where they love spring rafting.

Indeed, Friant contractors who take water from the San Joaquin River to irrigate land up and down the east side of the valley could see 75% to 65% of normal water deliveries—so-called Class 1—or even less if we don't get more rain soon.

A look at the snow pack in the Sierra gives us a glimpse of how little water content is stored up there that we depend on for irrigation and drinking water. In the Kaweah watershed Giant Forest station at 6600 feet registers just 23% of April 1 normal and much of the snow pack that was there a few weeks ago has melted away. Farwell Gap at over 9500 feet has just 44% of April 1

average with a little over 15 inches of water content compared to a normal 34.5 inches, experiencing daytime temps of 50 degrees F.

Statewide, the March 1 state forecast predicted runoff will be just 55% of average compared to last year when runoff was 160% of average.

Department of Water Resources puts snow melt at 61% on the San Joaquin, 59% on the Kings, 81% on the Kaweah and just 49% on the Tule as of March 1. The runoff forecast to be released April 1 will likely show a worsening of the situation. Only north coast and Bay Area runoff forecast show an 85 to 90% runoff prediction as wetter weather has visited that area.

More Fires

“The National Interagency Fire Center's Seasonal Wildland Fire Potential Outlook for February through June 2007 calls for the potential for significant wildfire activity to be higher than normal this spring over portions of the southern tier of states and northern Minnesota,” said Tom Wordell, Wildland National Interagency Fire Center fire analyst.

As of March 13, there have been approximately 9,748 wildfires encompassing 137,554 acres. This is 112 percent of the average number of fires, and 63 percent of average total acreage to date.

The U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook calls for drought conditions persisting or intensifying through June over much of the Southwest, potentially spreading into portions of Utah and western Colorado. Drought conditions are also expected to persist across peninsular Florida. Some improvement is predicted over the extreme northern Plains as well as portions of Texas and Oklahoma.

The warm weather that hit the state in recent weeks contrasts sharply with the extreme cold temps in January. “It shows California is a land of extremes,” says John Hibler. The low rainfall has hit Visalia as well with the rain gauge showing under three inches for the season—about a third of annual precipitation. “April is going to have to do something special if it's going to improve,” suggests John Hibler. Visalia gets an average of about one inch in April.

The region receives most of its rainfall during the winter months and clearly winter has left the building. The first day of spring is March 20, but already it feels like summer.

Pollution Impact

Also, new research published in Science magazine's current issue finds that air pollution particles, responsible for decreased rainfall in China, may also affect California's water supply.

The research showed California's precipitation losses over the mountains are projected at 10-25 percent, presumably because of pollution aerosols from urban and industrial areas. These losses have not noticeably affected the state's water supply because they may have been masked by an increased trend of statewide precipitation.

The impact of this research suggests that decreased mountain rainfall translates to a net loss of snowpack, loss of water for agricultural use, and reduced hydroelectric power production in the state.

Additionally, the California research quantified the losses in stream flows at 15-35 percent of annual flows in major Sierra Nevada rivers. Without man-made [air pollution](#) particles, precipitation levels in the Sierra Nevada in the past would have been higher.

There's gold in the Capitol once again

By Jim Sanders

In the Sacramento Bee and the Merced Sun-Star
Monday, March 26, 2007

SACRAMENTO -- A modern-day Gold Rush has erupted over \$43 billion targeted for California public works projects, with legislators crafting dozens of bills to affect how the money is spent.

Voter passage of the record bond package last November has spawned a frenzy in which communities and their officeholders are fighting for a piece of the massive pot.

"It's kind of like the heirs to the estate of some very wealthy person," said Darry Sragow, a Democratic strategist. "People fight over money -- and they fight especially hard over a lot of money."

More than 50 bond-related bills have been introduced, including some by legislators who want to steer money toward specific projects or key problems in their own district, including:

- Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Merced, whose Senate Bill 424 would commit \$1.4 million to Stanislaus County and \$15 million to Merced County to protect communities that flooded last year.
- Assemblyman Juan Arambula, D-Fresno, whose [Assembly Bill 575](#) would designate at least \$300 million apiece to two air districts -- in San Joaquin Valley and Southern California -- with major smog problems.
- Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, whose [Senate Bill 240](#) would commit \$50 million annually for the next six years to fight diesel truck emissions in the San Joaquin Valley.

Voters set aside specific sums for transportation, flood control, education, affordable housing and other needs, but state politicians or bureaucrats ultimately must decide which projects to bless, dump or delay.

"There are an infinite number of ways to spend all this money," Sragow said. "There's never enough money."

Some new bills aim to siphon money from one potential use to another, such as proposing to make port security or dam construction or energy conservation projects a priority.

Other measures tackle major public policy issues to lay a foundation for funding, such as whether growth areas should receive priority for levee projects or whether landowners should help pay for flood-control work.

Assemblyman Sandre Swanson, D-Alameda, has proposed Assembly Bill 655 to give an edge in obtaining bond contracts to small businesses in economically disadvantaged areas and to contractors who hire residents of low-income neighborhoods.

"I don't see it as a social handout, I see this as an economic investment in California's future that broadens the stakeholders," Swanson said.

Kevin Spillane, a GOP strategist, said politicians could sour prospects for future bond measures if they get greedy or attach too many strings.

"They can't resist the temptation," he said. "Ultimately, they're going to end up hurting themselves and the state."

But Arambula cautioned against jumping to conclusions, saying his bill to steer money to specific air districts was strategic, not selfish.

My goal "is to make sure we have a seat at the table when those decisions are made," he said.

Lobbyists are counting on a windfall from intense jockeying over bond funds.

"I think it's safe to say that there's money being spent, and there's probably a great deal more money to be spent as the bonds are let and the monies become available," said Don Burns, a veteran lobbyist. "There's no question but that it does spawn a lot of activity."

Legislative leaders and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vow the \$43 billion will not get tangled in special-interest politics.

"The people upheld their end of the bargain -- they voted to support these bonds," said H.D. Palmer, Schwarzenegger's finance spokesman. "The governor believes very strongly that it's incumbent upon us -- the Legislature and the administration -- to uphold our end of the bargain."

Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, an Oakland Democrat who helped lead last year's campaign for the bond package, said it is vital to adopt funding guidelines and criteria. But pork-barrel bills will die, he said.

"When someone comes in and says, 'I've got 22 acres and I want to turn it into a park in my district' -- no, that's not going to happen," Perata said.

Of the \$43 billion in bond funds, the Legislature will control \$33.4 billion because it must be appropriated through a two-thirds vote of each house, requiring at least a handful of GOP votes.

Garry South, a Democratic strategist, said it is logical for lawmakers to control the billions as taxpayers' elected representatives.

"But this money better damn well be justly spent, well spent and effectively spent," he said.

Perata said that he, Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez and GOP leaders undoubtedly will negotiate a bipartisan bond strategy.

"We're going to continue to work together," Perata said. "Absolutely."

Senate Republican leader Dick Ackerman, of Irvine, said he wants to make sure that GOP interests aren't shortchanged.

"We may need (Schwarzenegger) to veto some things if we can't get them stopped by ourselves," he said.

Nunez vows a "fair and equitable" distribution but led a political power play last month against California Transportation Commission (CTC) staff recommendations for spending the first slice of road bonds.

Federal cuts forcing TDOT to delay some road projects

Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Sunday, March 25, 2007

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - The Tennessee Department of Transportation plans to delay some road and bridge projects this year because of a \$73.4 million loss in funding due to federal transportation cuts, officials say.

The cuts have been expected for several months, but the extent was unknown until last Monday when the Federal Highway Administration informed states how they would be affected by the \$3.47 billion reduction in unobligated federal-aid highway funds apportioned for states nationwide.

"We're going to have to defer some projects that were scheduled this year and some scheduled next year," said state Department of Transportation Commissioner Gerald Nicely.

Nicely declined to identify how many or which projects would be delayed, but projects already under construction are not expected to be affected.

Rep. Gerald McCormick, R-Chattanooga, said transportation officials told him about 50 projects statewide will be affected by the cuts.

One of those is the Interstate 75 project at the Ooltewah exit near Chattanooga. The project includes widening 2.4 miles of I-75 and improving the interchange.

TDOT spokeswoman Julie Oaks said that project, initially expected to be included in April bid lettings, was delayed because of increasing costs and the need to conduct air quality testing.

"It was kind of a twofold thing," Oaks said. "The estimate jumped on us, and also we've got to get the (air pollution) study before we would bless the project."

The federal cut is occurring because Congress passed a measure that funds the rest of fiscal year 2007 at levels near those of fiscal year 2006.

Paul Degges, TDOT's chief engineer, said Tennessee's \$73.4 million loss represents 15 percent of the department's \$490 million federal allocation this year.

States neighboring Tennessee also hit hard include Georgia, which faces a \$119.3 million reduction in federal funding, and Alabama at \$65.7 million, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

Tennessee's two U.S. senators acknowledge the money has been decided for 2007, but they're doing what they can for the following year.

"The money has been decided for 2007, but we're working to determine the best course for 2008," said Laura Lefler, a spokeswoman for U.S. Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn.

Court fines Phenix City plant \$20 million for air pollution

Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Saturday, March 24, 2007

COLUMBUS, Ga. - A federal court has upheld a three-year-old verdict awarding the city of Columbus, a businessman and a resident damages totaling more than \$20.7 million from a local manufacturer for air pollution.

The 11th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in Atlanta affirmed a 2004 decision that found Continental Carbon Co. of Phenix City and its parent company, China Synthetic Rubber Corp., dumped carbon black into the air. The reinforcing and pigmenting agent - used in tires, inks, cables and coatings - drifted across the Chattahoochee River, causing damage to the Columbus Civic Center, recreational facilities, a boating sales company and a nearby home, according to lawyers in the case.

The court's opinion also requires the plant to fix the problem that some residents say still plagues the community.

Owen Ditchfield, who lives near the plant, said he's waited 2 1/2 years for a conclusion to the case. He was awarded \$45,000 and likely will get some of the larger award, but he said he's not received any of the money yet.

"I'm not sure what the company will do next," he said. "They seem to be experts at stalling."

Other residents who filed suit against Continental Carbon received settlements, and more lawsuits are possible because the issues caused by the pollution continue, Ditchfield said.

Calls to the Phenix City plant were not immediately returned.

Trust Targets Gas Leaks Killing Trees

By JAY LINDSAY, Associated Press Writer

N.Y. Times, Monday, March 26, 2007

BOSTON, (AP) -- Bob Ackley says minor natural gas leaks that are no threat to people can still cause harm: They kill public shade trees by choking off the oxygen at its roots.

Ackley, who has spent 25 years testing natural gas lines for leaks, says it's happening to thousands of trees around the state, and gas companies are slow to fix it.

So Ackley and attorney Jan Schlichtmann, famous for fighting for eight Woburn families in a pollution case portrayed in the book and John Travolta movie "A Civil Action," have set up the Massachusetts Public Shade Tree Trust to help communities stop the leaks and recover their costs.

"We can't be losing these trees," Ackley said. "Every tree that we lose that's 60, 70, 80 years old, it's going to take 60, 70 years to replace."

The new trust will be open at no cost to any of the state's 260 communities with natural gas lines. Once a community joins, the trust will catalog any trees damaged by natural gas leaks, then try to negotiate damage payments with gas companies. Earlier this month, Marshfield became the first community to join.

Gas company representatives dispute that leaks are widespread, saying federal regulations require them to annually detect and repair leaks. They also say tree-killing leaks are not generally known as a big problem.

Don DiNunno, of Bay State Gas, which has about 300,000 customers in the state, said the company already reimburses any damage to vegetation caused by gas leaks.

"I just feel confident that our system is well maintained and we respond accordingly if there are situations that require us to respond to a leak," DiNunno said.

Public shade trees can be worth near \$100,000 each, and Ackley estimates tens of millions of dollars in tree damage from leaks around Massachusetts.

Natural gas contaminates the soil with methane, causing methane-consuming bacteria to multiply and suck up the oxygen in the soil. That interrupts the crucial exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide between the soil and air, and carbon dioxide, methane and other components in natural gas build up and contaminate the tree's roots. The roots die and the tree follows, said Carl Cathcart, a certified arborist hired by the trust.

The problem of gas leaks damaging public trees isn't new. Schlichtmann cites a 1922 case in which the city of Salem successfully sued the Salem Gas Light Co. after leaking gas destroyed city shade trees.

But Schlichtmann said gas companies have recently neglected repairs for low level leaks which aren't considered safety risks, and communities are losing ancient trees that provide beauty and character.

"The companies are ignoring these leaks, ignoring the destruction to these urban forests, and it's the communities that are left in ignorance to pick up the damages," he said.

Carmen Fields, a spokeswoman for KeySpan, which has about 900,000 gas customers, most in eastern Massachusetts, said while non-hazardous leaks are sometimes not immediately repaired, Keyspan "goes to great lengths" to maintain the system's safety and reliability.

"Trees die, I'm not disputing that. Whether gas is always the cause, that remains to be determined," Field said. "We would take any claim seriously and make every effort to make a fair determination and reimbursement, if appropriate."

Ackley estimated the number of low level leaks statewide at more than 15,000, and said they often occur because the cast iron gas pipes used in the older systems were made for a wetter product than natural gas, so the pipe joints have dried out and become leaky.

Ackley, who also runs a company that tests for gas leaks in homes, said it's easy to spot trees that could be suffering from gas leaks: they dry out from the extremities and offer little shade, even in summer.

Schlichtmann and Ackley are now trying to build the trust's membership, and Ackley said he has up to 10 workers ready to investigate possible gas damage, which Cathcart would then have to verify. The trees' values will be determined using a standard system that considers factors such as size, age, species and location.

The scope of the problem will be obvious to gas companies once the trust investigates and lays it out, Ackley said.

"I think, by and large, the gas companies are going to be behind this because it's going to be the right thing to do," he said.

Paris Embraces Plan to Become City of Bikes

By John Ward Anderson

Washington Post Foreign Service

Saturday, March 24, 2007

PARIS, March 23 -- Paris is for lovers -- lovers of food and art and wine, lovers of the romantic sort and, starting this summer, lovers of bicycles.

On July 15, the day after Bastille Day, Parisians will wake up to discover thousands of low-cost rental bikes at hundreds of high-tech bicycle stations scattered throughout the city, an ambitious program to cut traffic, reduce pollution, improve parking and enhance the city's image as a greener, quieter, more relaxed place.

By the end of the year, organizers and city officials say, there should be 20,600 bikes at 1,450 stations -- or about one station every 250 yards across the entire city. Based on experience elsewhere -- particularly in Lyon, France's third-largest city, which launched a similar system two years ago -- regular users of the bikes will ride them almost for free.

"It has completely transformed the landscape of Lyon -- everywhere you see people on the bikes," said Jean-Louis Touraine, the city's deputy mayor. The program was meant "not just to modify the equilibrium between the modes of transportation and reduce air pollution, but also to modify the image of the city and to have a city where humans occupy a larger space."

The Socialist mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delano?, has the same aim, said his aide, Jean-Luc Dumesnil: "We think it could change Paris's image -- make it quieter, less polluted, with a nicer atmosphere, a better way of life."

But there is a practical side, too, Dumesnil said. A recent study analyzed different trips in the city "with a car, bike, taxi and walking, and the bikes were always the fastest."

The Lyon rental bikes, with their distinctive silver frame, red rear-wheel guard, handlebar basket and bell, can also be among the cheapest ways to travel, because the first half-hour is free, and most trips are shorter than that.

"It's faster than the bus or metro, it's good exercise, and it's almost free," said Vianney Paquet, 19, who is studying law in Lyon. Paquet said that he uses the rental bikes four or five times a day and pays 10 euros (about \$13) a year, half for an annual membership fee and half for rental credit that he never actually spends because his rides typically last just a few minutes.

Anthonin Darbon, director of Cyclocity, which operates Lyon's program and won the contract to start up and run the one in Paris, said 95 percent of the roughly 20,000 daily bike rentals in Lyon are free because of their length.

Cyclocity is a subsidiary of outdoor advertising behemoth JCDecaux, which runs much smaller bike businesses in Brussels, Vienna and the Spanish cities of Cordoba and Girona. London, Dublin, Sydney and Melbourne reportedly are considering similar rental programs.

The Cyclocity concept evolved from utopian "bike-sharing" ideas that were tried in Europe in the 1960s and '70s, usually modeled on Amsterdam's famous "white bicycle" plan, in which idealistic hippies repaired scores of bicycles, painted them white, and left them on the streets for anyone to use for free. But in the end, the bikes were stolen and became too beat-up to ride. A number of U.S. cities, including Portland, Ore., have also experimented with community-use bicycle programs.

JCDecaux experimented with designs and developed a sturdier, less vandal-prone bike, along with a rental system to discourage theft: Each rider must leave a credit card or refundable deposit of about \$195, along with personal information. In Lyon, about 10 percent of the bikes are stolen each year, but many are later recovered, Darbon said.

And to encourage people to return bikes quickly, rental rates rise the longer the bikes are out. In Paris, for instance, renting a bike will be free for the first 30 minutes, \$1.30 for the next 30 minutes, \$2.60 for the third half-hour, and \$5.20 for the fourth half-hour of use and every 30 minutes after that. That makes the cost of a two-hour rental about \$9.10.

Membership fees in Paris will be steeper than in Lyon, from \$1.30 for one day to about \$38 for a year.

The Paris deal will bring the world's biggest bicycle fleet to the City of Light in a complex, 10-year public-private partnership.

JCDecaux will provide all of the bikes (at a cost of about \$1,300 apiece) and build the pickup/drop-off stations. Each will have 15 to 40 high-tech racks connected to a centralized computer that can monitor each bike's condition and location. Customers can buy a prepaid card or use a credit card at a computerized console to release a bike.

The company will pay start-up costs of about \$115 million and employ the equivalent of about 285 people full time to operate the system and repair the bikes for 10 years. All revenue from the program will go to the city, and the company will also pay Paris a fee of about \$4.3 million a year.

In exchange, Paris is giving the company exclusive control over 1,628 city-owned billboards, including the revenue from them, for the same period. About half the billboard space will be given back to the city at no cost for public-interest advertising.

Based on statistics from Lyon, company officials estimate that each bicycle in Paris will be used on average 12 times a day, for a total of about 250,000 trips a day, or 91 million trips a year.

In Lyon, according to deputy mayor Touraine, the city's 3,000 rental bikes have logged about 10 million miles since the program started in May 2005, saving an estimated **3,000 tons of carbon dioxide** from being spewed into the air. Overall, vehicle traffic in the city is down 4 percent, he said, and bicycle use has tripled, not just on account of Cyclocity, but also because the program has prompted a boom in private bicycle use and sales.

The main complaint voiced by riders is that at certain times in certain places -- such as mornings at local universities -- all the racks can be occupied, making it impossible to return a bike. "I'm going to start using my own bike, because sometimes there are not enough spaces in the rack" at school, said art student Cecile Noiser, 19.

Company and city officials said that because the system sends in electronic data about which bikes are where, they are exploring ways to redistribute bikes using trucks to better match customers' needs. Touraine said the glitches are minor compared with the benefits.

[Commentary in Washington Post, March 25, 2007](#)

Free to Speak Truth to Power

By Warren Brown

I was ready to write another nasty column about federal Washington's one-sided approach to fuel economy and global warming when former vice president Al Gore came along and upset my plans.

Gore, a bona fide star of the Democratic Party -- the winner of an Academy Award -- was on Capitol Hill last week testifying before a joint session of the House Energy and Commerce Committee's subcommittee on energy and air quality and the House Science and Technology Committee's subcommittee on energy and the environment. He made similar appearances before the U.S. Senate.

I expected little from his visits. Washington loves celebrities. And the Democratic Party, which now controls Congress, loves Hollywood.

Gore, who won an Oscar for his documentary film, "An Inconvenient Truth," is a Hollywood celebrity who once was the second-highest-ranking Democratic officeholder in the nation. I figured his return to Capitol Hill would be a B-rated love fest suitable for quick release on disc, perhaps as an addendum to his movie.

But it was much more than that.

Gore's testimony actually made sense, especially on the matter of fuel economy and its relationship to global warming. He was succinct. "Don't single out cars and trucks," Gore said, adding that carbon emissions from motor vehicles constitute "a slice of the problem," and not the biggest slice at that.

He went on to suggest that Congress abandon its habitual blame-shifting, responsibility-dodging approach to energy conservation. He asked his former colleagues to draft legislation that would require contributions from all Americans -- industrialists and retailers, politicians and consumers. Yikes! Gore even called for increased taxes on fuels via taxation of carbon content.

That is a more palatable way of asking for a higher gasoline tax, inasmuch as gasoline is a fossil fuel and all fossil fuels contain carbon.

That's gutsy and smart. Gore's proposal embraces the reality that energy conservation is a two-part problem involving industries and their consumers. It recognizes that trying to solve the problem by working only one side of the equation, the industrial side, is doomed to ultimate failure.

To mitigate higher fuel taxes, Gore suggested that Congress rework the U.S. tax code to reduce taxes on employment and production and to earmark a portion of the money generated by higher fuel taxes to assist lower-income groups in America's shift to a low-carbon, less-oil-dependent economy. Those intelligent proposals could help what has long been regarded as "politically impossible" -- higher fuel taxes in support of energy conservation -- become possible.

Gore's view takes heed of an economic truth, evidenced by similar taxing strategies employed in Europe and Asia. Price affects consumption. When gasoline is cheap, people use more of it, regardless of any mandated fuel-economy standards. When gasoline is expensive, they tend to use less and to place a higher value on fuel-efficient cars and trucks. That means the companies making fuel-efficient vehicles can develop and sell them profitably -- relatively free of consumer demands, influenced by cheap gasoline, for more horsepower and ever bigger and faster vehicles.

By requiring all industries to bear a part of the carbon-reduction burden, Gore's proposals also would do something else: They would rid us of the hypocrisy of non-automotive industrial leaders

"going green" and ganging up on their automotive brethren, saying: "Yeah, we think you guys need to improve your fuel economy while we over here do nothing, or as little as possible."

But although I am surprised and pleased by Gore's statements, I'm also saddened. The courage and common sense of his proposals stem from something that became clear to me as he spoke: He is now a free man. He is not running for president of the United States, or for any other elective office. He can now afford to be honest, straightforward. He isn't in anybody's political pocket. He now has the ability to exercise leadership in the truest sense of the word -- to take an unpopular stand for the greater good, regardless of any personal consequence. In short, Gore is no longer a member of the political hierarchy that holds little respect for the intelligence and common sense of the American electorate.

Unfortunately, the same thing cannot be said for most of the members of Congress, Democrats and Republicans, who were applauding Gore's short visit to Capitol Hill last week. Those members, including Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), chairman of the Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee, still practice voodoo environmentalism -- a strange rite that insists that all can be made right with Mother Earth by asking industry to do everything while excusing consumers from doing, or paying, anything.

Want proof?

I'll put these questions before Boxer and her colleagues, Democrats and Republicans, to see how they answer:

? Exactly what are you willing to ask consumers to do to conserve fuel?

? What are you willing to do to ensure they do it, or at least strongly encourage them?

? Do you support higher fuel taxes, either through taxing carbon content or placing higher taxes on gasoline and diesel at the pump?

? Do you support taxes on things such as engine displacement and horsepower?

? Do you support the imposition of congestion fees in urban centers during rush hours?

? Do you support a return to a lower federal highway speed limit, or a tripling or quadrupling of fines for people exceeding current speed limits by more than 10 miles per hour?

? Do you support a cut in payroll taxes and production taxes to help offset increases in fuel taxes?

? Do you support a moratorium on the building of any new coal-fired power plant that does not plan to use the most effective technology to control plant emissions?

? Do you support programs to encourage consumers to generate their own electricity through means that won't release greenhouse gases into the air?

? Which, if any, of these proposals do you personally regard as "politically impossible"? Why?

Researcher Corinne Gavard contributed to this report.

[Letters to the Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, March 25, 2007:](#)

Watchdog needed

My congratulations to Kern County for not being a rubber stamp to the land developers here in Bakersfield. Please continue to be the prudent watchdog we all need.

I lived in Valencia for 25 years and saw the good and bad decisions made over there, the latter of which is evident today in the enormous traffic problems that commuters and travelers face every day.

Here in Bakersfield, we will also encounter heavy pollution if the developers fail to realize the growth impact on the environment.

Sufficient planning and studying of all aspects is required here, so that new growth is a blessing rather than a disaster.

EDWARD LEAHY, Bakersfield

Taxes never die

This is in answer to the person who wrote about people not caring about the half-cent sales tax for the roads. Well, if you were to ask the ordinary person why they voted it down, one big reason would be that every time a tax is levied it is never taken off.

Furthermore, the work, such as road repair, that is expected to be done with the new tax, won't be done no matter how much money they have.

The original idea with the tax on gas was to keep the highways up to date. That hasn't happened and look what we have to pay for gas today. The money we pay for personalized license plates was supposed to help clean the air and the air doesn't look too hot, either.

So if some are upset people voted down the half-cent sales tax for roads, these are some of the reasons it didn't pass.

We are continually asked for more money for roads, clean air and schools. Eventually people don't see anything changing and finally decide enough is enough. Until those in power actually start doing what they say, I am afraid that things are going to continue to be voted down.

PAULA RABOY, Tehachapi

[Letter to the Modesto Bee, Sunday, March 25, 2007:](#)

Break the smog law, get \$5,000

The Bee and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District are recommending we give \$5,000 to those who own "gross polluters." "Plan would pay \$5,000 each to get the worst 'gross polluters' off roads," March 20, Page B-6). Then we would destroy their cars and they could buy a better one. You say we would have less pollution.

Gross polluters can't pass the smog test. If your vehicle does not pass the smog test, you cannot have your vehicle registered. Nonregistered vehicles are illegal to drive. Why would you give \$5,000 to a person who is breaking the law? The air pollution control district and The Bee must be losing their collective minds to suggest such a plan. We have better things to do with our tax money. All we have to do is enforce the laws that we already have.

DONALD ULRICH, Denair

[Letter to the Sacramento Bee, Sunday, March 25, 2007:](#)

Thousands of cyclists out there

Re "Don't forget cyclists," March 22: Kudos to The Bee for a series of articles and editorials touting bicycling and transit as important strategies for cleaning the region's air and improving our quality of life.

However, when The Bee writes that "Every day, hundreds of local residents commute to downtown jobs by bicycle" (emphasis added) it trivializes bicycling's role in the area's transportation mix.

The Sacramento Area Council of Governments reports 100,000 trips per day made by bicycling in the region, compared to 80,000 for transit. While transit plays an indispensable role in peak-hour congestion relief, bicycling provides flexible, healthy, round-the-clock, point-to-point transportation.

Together (and with supportive land use) the two modes offer significant mobility options and create opportunities for people to shift limited household resources away from wasteful auto-related expenditures toward wealth-creating investments in housing, education and retirement savings.

For those willing to learn and practice a few basic skills pertaining to cycling on roads, bicycling offers a unique combination of fun, freedom of movement and affordability along with an enormous feeling of pride that one is part of the solution to the problems of global warming, air pollution, oil dependency and traffic safety.

Let's get riding!

CHRIS MORFAS, Sacramento