

Environmental group launches local campaign

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Friday, August 24, 2007

A San Francisco-based environmental organization with a new presence in Hanford chose Wednesday to launch a campaign for more environmental activism in Kings County.

Greenaction, whose involvement in Kings County dates back to an early-1990s fight over a proposed hazardous waste incinerator at the Chem Waste property near Kettleman City, kicked off its stepped-up local efforts with a noon press conference inside the organization's one-room office at 130 E. Eighth St.

Greenaction Director Bradley Angel discussed the group's concerns about several local projects, among them a proposed expansion to hazardous waste disposal operations near Kettleman City, a tire crumb melting plant being built on Hanford-Armona Road east of Highway 43 and a corn ethanol plant slated for south Hanford.

In attendance were leaders from People for Clean Air and Water, a Kettleman City group that has long opposed the Chemical Waste Management Inc. hazardous waste disposal site southwest of town; members of Struggle for Health and Environmental Justice, a new Avenal entity formed out of concerns about a municipal trash landfill near that city; and representatives from Hanford Environmental Awareness Team (HEAT), a group that has raised questions about the tire crumb melting plant.

"We both have environmental justice in mind," said Robin Mattos, a member of HEAT who attended the meeting.

"I think that as far as environmental issues are concerned, there should be a place where people can stop by and drop in," Mattos said.

"It's just that we don't know our rights, and people like this are going to tell us what we can do," said Hanford resident Andre Booker.

Booker said he lives downwind of the proposed ethanol plant location and is concerned about emissions.

At 1:15 p.m., Angel voiced some of those concerns at a meeting with Bill Zumwalt, Chuck Kinney and Jerry James, all of the Kings County Planning Agency.

Questions focused on the Modular Rubber Drains tire crumb melting plant already under construction on Hanford-Armona Road.

The facility, approved March 6 without public input, will churn out rubber drains and sidewalks by melting tire crumbs and pieces of plastic in a process company officials and San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials say won't create air pollution.

The plant was proposed last year for the Kings Industrial Park inside Hanford's city limits, but it ran into opposition.

Local concern peaked in November with HEAT members, backed by Greenaction, challenging the no-emissions claims and calling for more public scrutiny.

The city eventually rescinded the project's conditional use permit because neighbors hadn't been notified properly.

Under county rules, public notification of the project wasn't required, Zumwalt said.

Zumwalt said local agencies, including the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, approved the project.

"There's a lot of review that goes into these projects," Zumwalt said.

The process -- called site plan review -- allows county planners to get input from other agencies and make the decision to approve or disapprove without notifying the planning commission or the board of supervisors.

Conditional use permits -- a higher level of scrutiny -- must be approved by the planning commission and can be rescinded by the county's elected board of supervisors.

Projects involving a potentially greater environmental threat must go through an extensive environmental impact report before they can be approved.

Greenaction wants the Kings County Planning Commission to change the zoning rules so site plan reviews get bumped up to conditional use permit status.

The group plans to raise the issue at the planning commission's next meeting, scheduled for Sept. 10 at 7 p.m. in board chambers at the Kings County Government Center, 1400 W. Lacey Blvd.

"We just don't want backroom deals, people not being notified," Angel said.

Zaca fire update

Bakersfield Californian, Friday, August 24, 2007

Sources: Los Padres National Forest and Santa Barbara County Fire Department | Thursday,

As of 8 p.m. Thursday

The fire is burning in Santa Barbara County, and smoke is wafting into Kern County.

Acres burned: 232,449

Percent contained: 83

Expected containment: Sept. 7

People injured: 40

Structures threatened: 66

Destroyed: 1 outbuilding

People fighting blaze: 2,520

Equipment: 97 engines, 12 helicopters, eight air tankers, 29 dozers

Suppression costs: \$99.2 million

Eco-ficient Metro Express proving popular with riders

By [Anna Kaplan](#) - Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Friday, August 24, 2007

STOCKTON - The Metro Express diesel-electric hybrid bus, also known as Stockton's Route 40, is the second of three buses that Danika Powell takes to and from school every day.

Powell, 15, used to live near and attend Bear Creek High School, but when her family moved closer to Stagg High, she decided to remain at Bear Creek by taking city buses. Three buses each way make for a long commute, but she's glad not all the vehicles she sets foot in during the day are [polluting](#) the environment.

"They're fuel efficient, so they're actually helping the world," Powell said as she waited for the bus on Pacific Avenue outside Lincoln Center.

By the numbers

110,000: Miles driven by Metro Express buses since they hit the streets on Jan. 21

5.81: Average miles per gallon for a Metro Express bus, versus 3.32 for a regular bus

\$35,000: Money saved on fuel by using hybrid buses since Jan. 21

14,000: Gallons of diesel saved by using hybrid buses since Jan. 21

44,000: Passengers that ride the Metro Express per month

1,700: Passengers that ride the Metro Express each day

"" Source: San Joaquin

Regional Transit District

The popular route hit the streets six months ago, traveling from the Hammer Lane triangle to the Downtown Transit Center and running every 15 minutes during peak business hours.

It has proven itself to save money and fuel, as well as provide an efficient central line through the city, according to both those who run the service and those who depend on it for transportation.

About 44,000 people are riding the Metro Express every month.

This bus line is Stockton's first step toward a rapid transportation system, funded primarily by a grant from the San Joaquin Council of Governments and Measure K, the county's half-cent sales tax devoted to transportation projects. The idea behind it is similar to a light rail: direct routes with fewer stops.

Route 40 stops at the Hammer Lane triangle, Pacific Avenue at Lincoln Center, the malls, University of the Pacific, Cesar Chavez Central Library and the Downtown Transit Center. It takes about 25 minutes to ride the length one way.

The goal was to make the route function as the main connector for other city buses by sending it up and down the central artery of Pacific Avenue, making it possible for riders like Powell to connect between a central Stockton bus and a north Stockton bus.

Denise Frazier, 40, a Delta College student who lives near Lincoln Center and takes the bus to her classes, said the timeliness, as well as location, makes connections possible.

"I like the 15-minute time span. They're always on time, which makes it easier to transfer to another route," she said.

As it turned out, there was another consequence to having quick service between uptown and downtown.

"Anecdotally, we're seeing a different group of passengers," said Paul Rapp, a spokesman for the San Joaquin Regional Transit District, which operates the city's buses. "We're seeing more of a jacket-and-tie crowd that we weren't seeing before."

The company has yet to conduct rider surveys to determine exactly how many north Stockton residents take the bus to their downtown jobs as an alternative to driving, but Frazier and other riders said they see more professional-looking people on Metro Express buses than on other city routes.

Officials haggle over Bay Area train route; public meetings set

By Paul Rogers, MEDIANEWS STAFF
Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, August 24, 2007

The long-running debate over which route a high-speed bullet train system would take into the Bay Area is reaching a critical junction.

After more than 10 years of planning and studies on the massive proposal, which envisions trains whizzing at 220 mph between Los Angeles and the Bay Area, the California High Speed Rail Authority is holding a series of public hearings — including one in San Jose this afternoon — to tackle the question of where to lay the tracks.

"The decisions made based on these hearings will affect the Bay Area for the next 100 years, not unlike the way the transcontinental railroad affected Sacramento," said Rod Diridon, a former Santa Clara County supervisor who sits on the authority board.

The authority, a state agency, is expected to choose a preferred Bay Area route by the end of October. Meanwhile, questions about how to pay for the \$37 billion project loom.

San Jose leaders, including Silicon Valley business interests, have argued for several years that the train should make a southern approach from the Central Valley through Los Banos to Gilroy and up through San Jose en route to San Francisco. That would ensure every train stops at San Jose, rather than only some of them.

"Silicon Valley is the economic engine that drives Northern California," said Carl Guardino, president of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, which counts most of the area's largest high-tech companies among its members. "It's hard to imagine that Northern California's biggest city and biggest economic hub would be a spur and not a direct part of the line."

But East Bay leaders and several of the state's largest environmental organizations and rail advocacy groups want the trains to come into the Bay Area on a northern route, through the Altamont Pass. They argue that tens of thousands of commuters who live in Tracy, Stockton and Manteca would be able to leave their cars behind, [reducing traffic and smog](#), and that building it along Pacheco Pass could increase sprawl in the Los Banos-Merced area.

"We love high-speed rail," said Melissa Hippard, director of the Sierra Club's Loma Prieta Chapter in Palo Alto. "But in terms of the two route issues, this is another opportunity to help shape how we grow. Tracy-to-Oakland needs a lot more attention than the area out in Los Banos."

On Thursday, the South Bay route received a boost when San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom endorsed it at a public hearing in his city.

"To me, it's a proverbial no brainer," Newsom said later in an interview.

He said the Pacheco route would more effectively fit in with Caltrain and other existing infrastructure. Several options for the Altamont route call for construction of either a second transbay tunnel or a new bridge near the Dumbarton — an issue that could be mired in lawsuits for years.

"Putting a boat in the bay is problematic," Newsom said. "Driving piles and building new structures would be extraordinarily challenging."

But one of Newsom's constituents, Richard Mlynarik, who attended the San Francisco public hearing, disagreed. "The Altamont route is the only route that provides effective service between the Bay Area and Sacramento," he said.

Hippard, of the Sierra Club, said she supports a route over the Altamont Pass that would go around the bay without requiring a new bridge built through the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

But going around the bay from Altamont would increase ridership time to San Francisco, Newsom said, adding that he'd like to see more statewide leaders embrace high-speed rail.

"There's not enough freeway space to accommodate for the future growth of the state. We absolutely need this," he said. "There's a lot of rhetoric about how green we are in California. Here's an opportunity to demonstrate it in a significant way."

The rail authority approved the final 700-mile route for the rest of the state in 2005. The agency projects building the system would cost \$37 billion, funded by state money, federal money and fares. But because of the Altamont-Pacheco debate, the authority decided to fund a detailed environmental impact report on the Bay Area options.

That draft report, which came out last month, showed that each route essentially costs about the same. A system that comes up through Pacheco Pass and has hubs in San Jose, Oakland and San Francisco would cost \$16 billion and have 85 million riders a year by 2030, according to the study. A system that came over the Altmont Pass with hubs in those three cities would cost \$15 billion and have the same number of riders.

Each of the two systems would have either 10 or 11 Bay Area stations. Each would cost \$1.1 billion a year to operate and would generate \$2.7 billion in annual revenue by 2030, according to the environmental study.

"My view is that it is pretty much a wash," said Mehdi Morshed, executive director of the High Speed Rail Authority.

Morshed said he thought quality of life and environmental issues probably will be the deciding factor for his 9-member board.

"We're supposed to take the least environmentally damaging option," he said. "The focus has to be on the noise, the neighborhood disruption, the amount of wetlands affected, those kinds of things. That's what's going to swing the deal."

Following the public hearings this week — with San Jose set for tonight, Oakland Tuesday, Gilroy Wednesday and Merced Thursday — the rail authority should chose a preferred alternative by the end of October, Morshed said. One more round of public hearings will follow that, and the rail authority will certify the final environmental report by the end of the year.

Regardless of the route, one big question mark hanging over the project is money.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has promised to cut \$700 million from the state budget approved by lawmakers this week. He has given mixed signals on high speed rail in the past, and as part of his proposed budget this spring, he suggested only \$5 million for the High Speed Rail Authority. The authority said it needed \$104 million to finish engineering studies and acquire rights of way. In a compromise, the Legislature gave it \$20 million.

If Schwarzenegger cuts that, the authority, with six employees, would have to dial back its work.

"In the next few days, we will know if we are going forward or if we are closing down," said Morshed.

A \$9.95 billion bond measure to pay the first part of the project is approved for the November 2008 ballot. But it has been moved by state lawmakers twice before, in 2004 and 2006, to put highways, schools, and flood control projects on the ballot instead.

Alicia Trost, a spokeswoman for state Senate Leader Don Perata, D-Oakland, said Perata supports leaving the rail bond on the 2008 ballot.

"We are supportive of the project," she said. "He hasn't made a decision about which approach is best."

Today's meeting begins at 4 p.m. in the council chambers of San Jose City Hall, 200 East Santa Clara Street.

BMX track shuts down

Park official refuses to say more, citing legal dispute.

By Stan Oklobdzija - Bee Staff Writer

Modesto Bee, Thursday, August 23, 2007

A long-simmering lawsuit has closed down the BMX track in Orangevale's Pecan Park with no word yet on whether it will reopen.

Tim Mero, district manager of the Orangevale Recreation and Park District, confirmed the track was shut down Aug. 3. However, he refused further comment because of the lawsuit.

The suit was filed in 2003 on behalf of six Orangevale residents whose property abuts the track, said their attorney, Aaron Bensinger.

The residents are seeking the track's relocation as well as unspecified monetary damages, Bensinger said.

The case is currently awaiting trial, he said.

At issue, according to the civil complaint, is dust and dirt from the racetrack causing "significant detriment to air quality" and "physical discomfort and health risks to adjacent residents."

The track's location is unusual, Bensinger said, because "There's no other facility in Northern California that has tracks so close to residences."

Bensinger stressed that the track's closing caught his clients off-guard.

"(The district) didn't run it by my clients," he said. "They didn't notify us or anything."

As far back as 2002, the placement of the track was an issue of contention between the park district and the neighbors, who formed an ad-hoc group called the Oro Way Residents.

Aside from the dust, residents in the past claimed that noise from the track was making life unbearable and that kids frequently sneaked onto the track after hours, ruining the neighbors' quality of life.

The track has been open at least 20 years. Supporters contend it was there before the homes adjacent to it were built and that people buying the homes should have known it was there.

Bensinger said his clients hired an engineer to come up with possible sites to relocate the track. Some were within Pecan Park and others were on other properties owned by the Orangevale park district, he said.

Allison Adams, who lives near the track on Beech Avenue, said she was surprised to see the track close. Her 4-year-old son used to ride his bike there about three or four times a week, she said, but now he has nowhere to go.

"Where ... else are these kids going to ride their bikes? On the streets?" she asked.

Activists challenge port on truck pollution, jobs

Community group presents survey results to board members

By Francine Brevetti and Douglas Fischer
Tri-Valley Herald, Friday, August 24, 2007

OAKLAND — Wearing their signature red T-shirts, a contingent of West Oakland members of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now made their complaints clear about pollution and heavy truck traffic to the Port of Oakland board this week.

The group also challenged the port's efforts to offer jobs to local residents, saying available jobs are not sufficiently publicized.

Shirley Burnell, an ACORN member and part-time staffer, told the commissioners that 31 percent of the 200 people surveyed so far in West Oakland said they suffered from asthma, a result of the unhealthy air surrounding port operations.

According to the survey, 90 percent of respondents reported they were looking for jobs, of which 10 percent said they could not find work at all. And 37 percent are unemployed.

Community and ACORN members gave impassioned pleas for the port to change its acceptance of trucking companies using independent contractors. This practice, according to Corlena Decatur, a West Oakland resident and ACORN member, provides neither security nor work opportunities for the community.

"You need to do something to alleviate truck pollution by passing a comprehensive Clean Truck Program and that program needs to include employee status for drivers and local hiring," Decatur said.

But port officials countered that the port's own study had found a large part of the pollution was created by ocean-going cargo ships rather than idling trucks — a contrast with other emissions inventories by larger ports in Los Angeles and Long Beach that found trucks contribute a greater share of the operation's pollution.

However, Bernida Regan, the port's director of social responsibility, said the board has been addressing both concerns for some time and will continue to work on them.

She said she met with ACORN representatives just last week to explain the board's attempts to study the trucking industry and plan a local trucking job program.

Regan said she expected a detailed plan to be ready within the next year.

The group repeatedly asked the port to establish an outreach program to inform the community of job openings.

Regan said the port maintains an employment office, the Employment Resources Development Program, which posts opportunities in the port building's lobby as well as online.

On the issue of truck pollution, the port's "emissions inventory" found that 80 percent of diesel particulates, or soot, came from the large container ships calling at the port's 20 berths.

Big rigs, in contrast, account for 6 percent of the emissions, with harbor craft such as tug boats and miscellaneous cargo-handling equipment contributing the rest.

Soot is a leading contributor to many breathing ailments, particularly asthma. Community advocates and others pushing the port to reduce the amount of soot spilling into neighboring West Oakland homes and schools say the report's methodology appears to understate the trucks' role, potentially undermining efforts to spend money to clean up the fleet.

Cargo ships — and their emissions — are governed by a complex, hard-to-change web of international laws. What comes out of trucks' exhaust pipes is far easier to regulate.

But while the port's emissions inventory tracked ship pollution from nearly 15 miles outside the Golden Gate, the port stopped counting truck pollution once the rigs hit the nearest freeway onramp.

"This (report) makes it look like investing money or time in trying to clean up trucks is not the best use of resources," said Swati Prakash, director of Oakland-based Pacific Institute's environmental justice program.

"Putting out an emissions inventory like this ... undermines that effort."

Port spokeswoman Marilyn Sandifur said the study was developed to be compatible with other assessments under way by regional and state air regulators. More information about truck

emissions outside the port's boundaries will be incorporated in the future, she added, and efforts to trim truck pollution will continue.

"This information is going to help us as we move forward," Sandifur said. "It's not just about addressing one source. The way you deal with emissions is to look at all sources, and (ask) how can you best address these, and is it a good investment."

But the Port of Oakland's inventory places a far larger share of the blame on ships than inventories from California's two other large ports, in Long Beach and Los Angeles.

Those ports employ different methodologies. At the Port of Long Beach, cargo ships account for 59 percent of the soot, while the ships account for about 21 percent at the Port of Los Angeles. Trucks contribute about 10 percent.

Sandifur cautioned that comparisons among ports can be misleading.

"When you look at the scale, you're dealing with significantly different operations."

Oakland, the nation's fourth busiest container port, handles about 15 percent of the volume of the combined ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the nation's first and second busiest ports, respectively.

[Letter to the Bakersfield Californian, Friday, August 24, 2007:](#)

Stop 'fiddling' and help

Perhaps a recent headline should read "Arnold and the State Legislature fiddle with the budget, while Bakersfield gets buried in smoke and ash."

Anyone with a breathing problem is not allowed outside and the rest of us try to avoid it as much as possible. Ash is falling like snow. The sun, when we can see it at all, is red. A two-block walk makes the lungs burn. And nothing is being done about the Santa Barbara/Ventura fire, because we can't get resources to fight it. (Read that funding, which should be in the non-existent budget).

Perhaps if the legislature were to convene down here, something might be done. Perhaps they would like a nice open-air meeting, in Yokuts Park, say about 4 p.m.

It is sad that politics is willing to tamper with people's health and well being. There are items that can be fought over, but the health of 700,000 constituents is not one of the "line items."

I assure you that the way this is being handled will be right in the front of my mind when I go to the voting booth. It appears that the pickings may be slim -- I certainly don't see anyone fighting for our well being.

When our weather calendar shows nothing but "smoky," it is time to review who we plan to vote into office for the next term -- if we can find anyone willing to stand up and fight for us!

Mike Bemiss, Bakersfield