

Valley partnership sets goals

Leaders work on plans for economic growth, health and more.

By Jeff St. John / The Fresno Bee

Friday, Oct. 5, 2007

With a 10-year plan in place to improve the Valley's economy, environment and quality of life, the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley held its annual meeting Thursday to focus on what steps the group now needs to take to meet its goals.

The 30-plus member partnership, formed in 2005 by Gov. Schwarzenegger, has already helped bring millions of dollars to the region for job training programs and played a role in securing \$1 billion in state funds for improving Highway 99.

But future successes will require even more participation by public officials and business leaders, partnership leader Ashley Swearengin told about 400 people at the Visalia Convention Center.

"Literally thousands of people are involved in this work throughout the Valley," said Swearengin, director of the Office of Community and Economic Development at Fresno State, the office serving as a coordinator for the partnership.

To tackle the problems the San Joaquin Valley faces -- crime, poverty, low educational attainment and poor air quality among them -- the partnership has set goals to attain clean air standards, develop its health and education systems, plan for sustainable growth with a strong transportation system and build a diversified and globally competitive economy.

"I'm extremely optimistic that we'll accomplish our 10-year plan and reap all the benefits of that," Swearengin said.

But to do that, the Valley will have to carefully weigh its economic strengths to compete in the globalized economy, an expert on regional development told the audience.

"The problem with most regions today is that they just don't do their homework," said Mark Drabenstott, director of the Rural Policy Institute's Center for Regional Competitiveness at the University of Missouri-Columbia. "They never ask, 'What are we best at?'"

Drabenstott said the central San Joaquin Valley faced the same challenge many rural regions across the country face -- trying to compete in a global economy in which innovation and entrepreneurship, rather than low wages and high-volume commodity-based economies, holds the greatest opportunity for success.

"You have no choice as to whether or not you're going to run this race," he said. But economic development models that depend on recruiting large-scale employers to regions through incentives like tax breaks and low wages only force regions to compete against each other, and "I don't think that's a race we want to win."

Instead, the region should assess what its economic strengths are and find ways to add value to those existing strengths, he said. The small-yet-growing market for organic food could provide San Joaquin Valley growers one such outlet, he said.

Also, the region must find ways to harness the capital available here to invest in entrepreneurial businesses, he said.

"I suspect there is an enormous amount of wealth in this great valley," he said, "but I suspect a good deal of it is literally buried in the earth."

Compost firm may be fined **Supervisors to tackle the issue at Tuesday meeting**

By James Burger, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, Oct. 5, 2007

A Lamont composting facility has been ordered to clean up its act.

And Kern County supervisors are being asked to put teeth in those county cleanup orders by fining the company, Community Recycling Inc., \$500 a day until piles of crushed concrete and smashed wallboard are trucked away.

County officials estimate that Community Recycling has collected 10,800 cubic yards of concrete and 38,800 cubic yards of gypsum wallboard on properties on Wheeler Ridge Road and Bear Mountain Boulevard south of Lamont.

Community Recycling never got a permit to keep the material on the property, county planners have said.

The company told the county in a letter that it would apply for a permit to continue crushing the concrete and gypsum.

But Kern County Supervisor Michael Rubio, who represents the area where the business operates, has said he is not happy with companies that come into Kern County, break land-use laws and then ask for a permit to legitimize their illegal behavior.

He said Thursday that the proposed fine "sends a message to peddlers who are bringing material from Southern California that this will not be allowed in Kern County."

County staff have proposed two kinds of fines on Community Recycling, and supervisors will vote on them Tuesday.

There would be an immediate \$5,000 fine on the company, followed by a \$500-a-day fine until the piles -- the most lofty of which is 28 feet tall -- are removed.

If the piles aren't gone within 90 days, an additional \$10,000 fine is recommended and the daily fine on Community Recycling would double to \$1,000.

Supervisors will also consider placing smaller fines on the Lamont Public Utilities District, which owns the property the piles are on and leases it to Community Recycling, said county Engineering and Survey Services Director Chuck Lackey.

A late afternoon call to Community Recycling manager Dave Baldwin was not immediately returned.

"I look forward to Community Recycling cleaning up the material," Rubio said.

Community Recycling has faced other county enforcement actions since it was discovered, in June, that compost it was spreading on nearby farmland was filled with waste plastic and metal.

The company is in the process of cleaning up that trash.

EPA to do asbestos soil, air sampling in Coalinga

By Record Staff

Coalinga Record, Wednesday, Oct. 3, 2007

The Environmental Protection Agency will sample soil and air at a portion of the Atlas and Coalinga Asbestos Mines Superfund sites in Coalinga during the weeks of Oct. 9 and Nov. 5.

The mines are on the EPA's Superfund list -- hazardous waste sites the government cleans up. As part of the Superfund process, the EPA conducted a five-year review in 2006 of the Coalinga Asbestos Mine site cleanup. The review noted that the cleanup standard for asbestos in soil had changed, and recommended the EPA sample soil and air to determine that the cleanup continues to protect human health and the environment. Air, soils, sediments and surface water can contain asbestos. People who come into direct contact with, accidentally ingest, or inhale contaminated surface water, sediments, soil, or air may be at risk.

"We are sampling to ensure that the site cleanup the EPA did in the early 1990s continues to protect the community," said Keith Takata, the EPA Superfund Director for the Pacific Southwest region. "The information gathered will determine if additional work is necessary."

Beginning Oct. 9, the EPA will collect soil samples in Coalinga along West Elm Avenue south of Pacific Street and north and south of the underground waste management unit, which was built during the original cleanup to store asbestos contaminated material. The EPA will also take samples in four separate areas of city property for background comparison.

In early November, some areas where soil samples were collected will be raked to produce small, localized dust clouds. Technicians will wear personal air samplers to measure any asbestos released into the breathing zone from the disturbed soil. Soil and air sampling should not affect anyone at surrounding homes or businesses, EPA officials said.

During sampling activities, technicians wear white protective clothing and respiratory protection as a precaution. Because these technicians routinely work with hazardous materials, federal health and safety rules require them to wear protective gear.

In the early 1990s, the EPA cleaned up a 107-acre area adjacent to West Elm Avenue south of Highway 33 in Coalinga where asbestos from the Atlas and Coalinga asbestos mines was processed and shipped.

Approximately 20,000 cubic yards of asbestos, chromium and nickel-contaminated soil and building debris was excavated from the surface of the site and consolidated into an on-site underground waste management unit.

The EPA will report the sampling results in early 2008. The agency will evaluate the results and release information about any future cleanup activities that may be necessary at the site.

The Coalinga Asbestos Mine site covers 120 acres near Coalinga. The mill was operated by the Coalinga Asbestos Company as a joint venture between the Johns-Manville Sales Corporation, the Kern County Land Company and private investors from 1962 to 1974, when the mill property reverted to the Southern Pacific Land Company. The land company leased the facility to the Marmac Resource Company for chromite mining in 1975. All operations stopped in 1977.

The site consists of partially demolished mill buildings and a process waste mine tailings pile that occupies about 20 acres. Two large open-pit mines are located above the mill site and were used

as the sources of ore for the Coalinga Asbestos Company milling operations. While the mill was operating, some milling and mining products from the mine were transported to Coalinga.

The Atlas Asbestos Mine site covers 435 acres near Coalinga. The mine operated from 1963 until 1979 and consisted of the asbestos mine, a processing mill, support buildings and extensive asbestos mine tailings. During operation, some milling and mining products from Atlas were transported to Coalinga.

The 107-acre area in Coalinga was operated as an asbestos milling, manufacturing, storage and transportation center. It consisted of four areas: The warehouse, which once was a mining waste storage and distribution center; a storage yard containing asbestos-contaminated stacked pipes; a shipping yard used as an asbestos distribution center by the Atlas Asbestos Company; and the U.S. Asbestos Company, which stored piles of asbestos-contaminated mining waste.

The Atlas mine area drains directly into White Creek, which drains into Los Gatos Creek, a tributary of the Arroyo Pasejaro, a flood area along the California Aqueduct. A detention basin was built in the flood plain to store water during heavy run-off and to allow the asbestos-laden sediment to settle. Sediments carried by floodwaters silted up the detention basin and diminished its storage capacity, so that during heavy floods the waters could potentially be released into the canal through four drain inlets, carrying asbestos into the aqueduct.

In the past, elevated levels of asbestos have been found in the aqueduct. However, most of the downstream users of the aqueduct water are protected by filtration and settling pond systems, which trap most of the asbestos fibers. In 2004, the Department of Water Resources enlarged the detention basin to increase its holding capacity during flooding.

More information about the cleanup in the city of Coalinga or at the Atlas and Coalinga Asbestos Mines Superfund Sites is available at www.epa.gov/region09/waste/sfund/superfundsites.html. Information is also available at the Coalinga District Library, 305 N. Fourth St.

Officials hope voters might favor gas tax boost to fight warming

By Rachel Gordon, staff writer
S.F. Chronicle, Friday, October 5, 2007

Regional officials are taking a close look at trying to increase the Bay Area's gasoline tax by as much as 10 cents a gallon and believe voters might agree to it as a way to help combat global warming, The Chronicle learned Thursday.

Although the regional Metropolitan Transportation Commission has been able to ask voters for a higher gas tax since 1997, a decade of polls indicated there was little chance such an unpopular idea would ever secure the necessary two-thirds approval in the nine Bay Area counties.

Now, however, with public concern building over climate change, the electorate might not be so opposed to a new gas tax as long as voters see it as a way to help the environment, officials said.

A 10-cent-a-gallon increase in the Bay Area could generate an estimated \$300 million a year or more to pay for transportation-related projects. Although the money could be used for roads, the emphasis probably would be on public transit and efforts to reduce auto pollution.

"People will kill their puppies to stop global warming these days," said Dave Snyder with a smile. Snyder is transportation policy director at the San Francisco Policy and Urban Planning Association, a think tank.

The state gas tax now is 18 cents a gallon; the federal tax is an additional 18.4 cents a gallon. That doesn't include sales tax, which varies by county.

"There are a lot of folks out there talking about wanting to do something about global warming," said Randy Rentschler, the manager of legislation and public affairs for the commission, which is a transportation planning and funding agency. And while action in the Bay Area alone can't do much to address the problem, "it can serve as a model for other places to follow," he said.

Staff from the commission, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, the Association of Bay Area Governments and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission have been discussing the prospect of putting a gas tax measure before voters.

None of the regional agencies has brought a plan to directors for consideration, and those involved say there is no concrete proposal.

One idea being floated is to propose a gas fee, which, because it isn't called a tax, would need only a majority of voters to approve it.

But what fees can be spent on is severely limited; there is much more flexibility in how tax revenue can be spent. Although the commission has state permission to go forward with a tax - the cap is 10 cents a gallon - the state Legislature would have to sign off on the fee proposal before it could go before voters.

The Bay Area Council, a business-backed public policy group, favors the fee approach, council spokesman John Grubb said. His organization last polled Bay Area voters three years ago about their feelings on raising the gas tax. Support then was around 50 percent. Tying the issue directly to global warming would help boost support, he said.

Car and truck emissions are one of the top causes of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide. Only electricity plants - particularly coal-powered ones - are a bigger source of carbon dioxide, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"Now, thanks to Al Gore and many others, carbon reduction has become a cause, a lifestyle," Grubb said.

But Kris Hunt, executive director of the Contra Costa Taxpayers Association, said that doesn't necessarily mean that people will be willing to dig deeper into their wallets.

"This is probably the wrong time to raise the gas tax, given how high the cost of gas is now," said Hunt, who, like her organization, has not taken a position on the issue.

Jack Broadbent, executive officer of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, stressed that no decision has been made on how, or if, to proceed. However, he said, he expects a proposal to be developed over the next year. In all likelihood, the earliest a plan could go before voters would be 2009.

He said his agency has a number of ideas on how to put additional revenue to use. For example, he said, the agency could expand its program to retire older, polluting vehicles and to install remote sensors on the roadways that detect and identify high-polluting vehicles.

Transit agencies around the Bay Area have ideas on what they would want to do with extra money.

San Francisco Municipal Railway officials, for example, say they need an additional \$150 million a year to make significant improvements to on-time performance. BART is looking at a plan to extend into eastern Contra Costa County, which has a price tag topping \$480 million.

Opponents of offshore LNG proposal dominate Oxnard public hearing

in the Modesto Bee, Thursday, October 4, 2007

OXNARD, Calif. — Opponents of a proposed offshore liquefied natural gas facility dominated the first public hearings on LNG processing plans for oil rig Platform Grace some 12 miles off Ventura County.

Residents want an environmental impact study to examine the potential effects on marine wildlife, air quality, shipping lanes, seismic safety and terrorism threats.

"California has no need for this gas," community activist Ed Ellis said during Wednesday's hearing at the Oxnard Performing Arts Center. "Why should Ventura County suffer all the ill effects of this project?"

NorthernStar Natural Gas of Houston wants to convert Platform Grace to an LNG receiving station in the Santa Barbara Channel. The proposed facility would convert superchilled natural gas to vapor and send it ashore by undersea pipeline to the Reliant Energy plant at Mandalay Beach.

Opponents said the onshore pipeline required to transport gas from the Reliant plant to a facility in Somis would travel too close to public schools. And many questioned whether California even needs an LNG plant.

Community activist Diane Moss said Sempra Energy has nearly completed a Mexico natural gas conversion facility in Baja California that will send gas to California.

"So is this redundant infrastructure?" she asked.

NorthernStar was pleased with the wide range of issues the public wants addressed in the environmental study, spokesman Joe Desmond said.

The Platform Grace plan is the second offshore LNG facility proposal off Ventura County. In April, the State Lands Commission, the California Coastal Commission and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger rejected a plan by Australian mining firm BHP Billiton.

BHP's project was largely rejected because of air pollution and greenhouse gas concerns. But Desmond said NorthernStar's planned Clearwater Port, as the Platform Grace terminal is called, would comply with Ventura County's stringent air quality rules.

Critics who claim California doesn't need natural gas are "simply wrong," said Carpinteria Councilman Joe Armendariz, a supporter of the NorthernStar project.

Nationwide economic growth to 2025 will require a 40 percent increase in natural gas supplies, Armendariz said, quoting U.S. Department of Energy estimates.

Study Says Finland Best For Living

By REUTERS

In the N.Y. Times, Friday, October 5, 2007

HELSINKI (Reuters) - The Nordic countries are the world's greenest and, despite the cold winters, Finland is the best country to live in, according to a Reader's Digest study released on Friday.

Finland was followed by Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Austria.

"Finland wins high marks for air and water quality, a low incidence of infant disease and how well it protects citizens from water pollution and natural disasters," the study said.

The United States was 23rd on the list of 141 countries, Britain was 25th and China 84th. Nations at the bottom of the table were all African.

Stockholm scored as the best city to live in out of 72 major metropolitan hubs, followed by Oslo, Munich and Paris. Four German cities won a spot in the top 10 list. New York was 15th and London 27th.

The dirtiest cities were in Asia, with Beijing, host of next summer's Olympic, at the bottom because of its air pollution.

The study was conducted by U.S. environmental economist Matthew Kahn, who looked at issues such as quality of drinking water and greenhouse gas emissions as well as factors such as education and income.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses groups demanding Governor sign Air Board bill. For more information, please contact Maricela \(559\) 230-5849.](#)

Piden incluir a un científico y a un doctor en panel oficial de monitoreo del aire en CA

"Creo que no hay nadie aquí en Arvin, y tenemos mucha gente con asma y con alergias, porque la contaminación está horrible, horrible", sostuvo Corona Zaidee Stavely, Noticiero Latino Radio Bilingüe, Wednesday, October 3, 2007

Residentes de la ciudad más contaminada en todo el país se manifestaron ayer para exigirle al gobernador que firme una iniciativa de ley que incluiría a un doctor y a un científico entre las autoridades regionales del aire. Hasta ahora la mesa directiva del aire en la región está compuesta por supervisores de los condados y concejales de algunas ciudades. Ana María Corona dice que es necesario que el gobernador firme la ley para cuidar la salud de la gente.

"Creo que no hay nadie aquí en Arvin, y tenemos mucha gente con asma y con alergias, porque la contaminación está horrible, horrible", sostuvo Corona.

El gobernador ha criticado en el pasado a la mesa regional del aire por extender la fecha límite para limpiar el aire en la región. Tiene hasta el 14 de octubre para firmar la iniciativa.

[Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register Editorial, Thursday, Oct. 4, 2007:](#)

Air board can use science as guide

Air quality in the San Joaquin Valley is the best it has been in three decades.

Imagine how good it could be with the application of a little science.

The governor can rectify that by signing a bill that would add a doctor and a scientist to the local air board.

In its report this week in Visalia, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District noted that the Valley's number of bad air days was the lowest since records were started to be kept 30 years ago. The district had 64 bad air days during the official summer season reckoned from

June 1 through Sept. 30. That was a significant decrease from 2002, when the Valley had a record 125 bad air days, or about four out of every five days.

The news with ozone is even better. The number of days when Valley air contained excessive levels of ozone has dropped steadily from 134 in 2003 to a low of 64 this past summer.

The Valley has also attained compliance with the federal Clean Air Act for five of the eight pollutants in which the federal government requires improvement.

The news isn't all good: The Valley is still one of the worst air basins in the country, second only to the South Coast Air Basin (Southern California), which had 78 bad air days this summer.

No, we are hardly at the point where we will be able to see the Sierra every day in summertime, but we're getting closer.

This is small comfort to those who are afflicted with our basin's bad air.

We are making progress, however. It has come about with the cooperation of local government, business and industry and residents, all of whom have adjusted their practices to help spare the air.

Some of the credit for this lies with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, a multi-agency coalition of local governments in the Valley.

The district establishes recommendations, guidelines and, on occasion, regulations for industry and residents that it believes will reduce contributions to air pollution. The district has mostly relied on voluntary compliance and education. On occasion, it has stepped in with regulations, even though its enforcement capacity relies on its member government.

The district operates with a professional staff, and it answers to the people through its directors, who are appointed from the eight Valley counties and major cities in the San Joaquin Valley.

So far, the district board members have been supervisors from the eight counties and representatives from three cities.

This structure has done pretty well, but it is about time that the district add technical experts to the board.

A bill passed by the Legislature and on the governor's desk would increase the number of members on the district board.

Added would be two more members from city governments. Also added would be a doctor and a scientist from the Valley.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has until Oct. 14 to sign or veto the bill. If he does nothing by then, it becomes law.

We urge the governor to sign the bill and strike a blow for science.

A poll by the Public Policy Institute of California has indicated that more than 76 percent of San Joaquin Valley residents favor adding scientists to the air board. The percentage goes up to 84 percent among likely Republican voters.

Business, agriculture and academia have for years clamored for the application of science when determining regulations and practices to reduce air pollution. Farmers, for instance, would like further scientific studies to determine more precisely what their contribution to air pollutants is.

The construction industry seeks scientific analysis to determine how much dust it generates that becomes polluting. The trucking industry wants scientific data before it begins forcing members to restrict their practices.

As representatives of the people, supervisors and city council members ought to oversee practices that affect our lives. But they ought to be guided more directly by technical experts.

The Valley is improving its air quality. It can do even better with the guidance of science.

[Sacramento Bee editorial, Friday, October 5, 2007](#)

Clearing the air

Air Board corrects course under new leader

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger came under harsh criticism earlier this year when his Air Resources Board voted to seek an 11-year delay in meeting new federal ozone standards in the San Joaquin Valley.

Schwarzenegger professed shock -- shock! -- his air board would endorse such a backslide. He fired the air board's chairman, Robert Sawyer, claiming Sawyer's handling of the San Joaquin decision was one reason for his dismissal.

The governor's move seemed to suggest that Sawyer's successor, Mary Nichols, would quickly move to toughen timelines for the San Joaquin. When that didn't happen, a coalition of valley environmentalists and doctors started to wonder if they'd been snookered.

Last week, Nichols and the governor's air board put suspicions to rest. The board announced a strategy to reduce ozone in the Central Valley by 90 percent by 2018.

To meet this timeline, the Air Board plans to strengthen an existing plan to clean up diesel trucks. It also plans to reduce emissions from tractors and other farm equipment and work with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to speed up implementation of rules cutting pollution from off-road diesel equipment.

Meeting the 2018 goal of cutting smog 90 percent won't be easy. Growth in the valley continues to sprawl, meaning more emissions from long commutes. Pollution from trucks and farms is hard to control.

To meet these challenges, the state will need cooperation from the San Joaquin air district. That's why the governor should sign Senate Bill 719, by Mike Machado, D-Linden. It would expand the air district's membership and give cities more clout in the vital work of clearing the valley's air.