

Residents, firefighters oppose refinery's proposed use of chemical

By Emily Hagedorn, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Monday, April 7, 2008

Local residents and firefighters are kicking off the first local organized opposition to Big West of California's plans to use hydrofluoric acid, the controversial chemical in its expansion.

The group, Bakersfield Citizens Against Hydrofluoric Acid, is announcing the campaign at 9:30 a.m. today at the Liberty Bell on Truxtun Avenue.

"It is so incredibly dangerous," said group organizer Betsy Ramsey of the chemical. "It's a step backward."

The Rosedale Highway refinery's Health, Safety and Environmental Director Bill Chadick could not be reached for comment Sunday.

Refinery officials said last week that an upcoming revised environmental report contains a detailed explanation of their decision to use hydrofluoric acid, known as HF.

Debate over the chemical began when the refinery disclosed plans last February to use it, according to *Californian* archives. Later, Big West decided to use a modified form of HF with a reduced ability to vaporize if spilled.

Modified HF is considered safer, though some experts say it's not as safe as sulfuric acid.

State Sen. Dean Florez urged Big West to drop its plans to use HF Thursday and threatened to pursue a statewide ban on the chemical if the refinery doesn't ditch it for sulfuric acid.

The company decided against using sulfuric acid because it's more costly, uses more energy and requires more acid, according to *Californian* archives.

Ramsey has followed recent news stories about the refinery and decided to get involved after the Kern County Fire Fighter's union came out against HF, she said.

"That speaks volumes to us," she said. "They're here to protect us."

Derek Robinson, president of the local union, said the group is not against the refinery's plans to expand or create more jobs for Kern County. They're just opposed to HF.

"Hydrofluoric acid is hydrofluoric acid," he said of the refinery's plans to use the modified version. "The refinery is in the heart of town and could potentially affect thousands of people in a matter of minutes."

Ramsey hopes the group's voices get heard by city and county officials.

If you go

What: Bakersfield Citizens Against Hydrofluoric Acid's campaign announcement

When: 9:30 a.m. today

Where: The Liberty Bell at Truxtun and Chester avenues

Florez opposes chemical's use at Big West

By Stacey Shepard, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, April 4, 2008

State Sen. Dean Florez has jumped into the debate over a local refinery's plans to expand.

Florez on Thursday urged Big West of California to drop plans to use the controversial chemical hydrofluoric acid in a \$700 million project to boost gas and diesel output at the Rosedale Highway refinery.

Florez threatened to pursue a statewide ban on the chemical if the refinery doesn't instead use sulfuric acid, widely seen as safer. He said hydrofluoric acid's risks to residents, schools and businesses are great and could make the community a potential terrorist target.

"If you weigh the human problems and safety problems by using this (chemical), it's clear to us this facility needs to use sulfuric acid," said Florez, chair of the state Senate's Committee on Governmental Organization, which oversees emergency preparedness in the state.

Refinery officials would not comment on Florez's call to switch chemicals. But they said an upcoming revised environmental report contains a detailed explanation of their decision to use hydrofluoric acid, known as HF.

Debate over HF began when Big West disclosed plans to use it in an initial environmental report released last February. Following media reports on the chemical's dangers, county planners hired a consultant to assess the project's safety and better review alternatives.

Around the same time, Big West decided to use a modified form of HF with a reduced ability to vaporize if spilled. Modified HF is considered safer, though some experts say it's not as safe as sulfuric acid.

Refinery officials have said they feel confident in their decision to use modified HF. The company decided against using the sulfuric acid process because it's more costly, uses more energy and requires a higher volume of acid.

The county is expected to release the new environment report assessing the safety of modified HF in coming weeks. Florez called on the community to let the Planning Commission and county supervisors know where they stand on the chemical's use.

After several high-profile spills in the 1980s, HF earned a bad reputation. The South Coast Air Quality Management District tried to ban the chemical from its four refineries but lost a court battle on a technicality. Two of the refineries later closed and the remaining two have switched to modified HF.

However, Florez contends that it's still not safe enough.

"We want to make sure the public knows we're no safer with this product than we were the last," he said.

What are all these chemicals?

HF is used in oil refining to produce alkylate, a substance that boosts octane in fuel. It forms a cloud when spilled that can travel up to five miles and hurt or kill people.

The federal government has identified facilities that use the chemical as potential terrorist targets.

Modified HF is seen as safer because it contains an additive that decreases by 60 to 80 percent the ability of the chemical to form a cloud if spilled.

Sulfuric acid is dangerous but seen as safer than HF because it doesn't vaporize when spilled.

Builders experiment, struggle with solar-powered homes

By Vanessa Gregory, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Sunday, April 6, 2008

In the past year, electric bills for Don Turney's 2,400-square-foot house totaled a mere \$168.

A few builders got into solar power during the boom, but they're still struggling to sell solar panels to the consumer. Castle & Cooke said they had to give away the solar systems in their new Windermere subdivision to sell the homes.

The new home he bought in February 2007 came with a 3.2 kilowatt solar system, and now the Bakersfield College psychology professor says he'll never again go without sun power.

"I was basically raised with an eye toward an energy conscious home," Turney, 51, said. "Not only is it beneficial to the environment, it's beneficial to my pocketbook."

But Turney's mindset is exceptional among new home consumers, many of whom show little willingness to fork over money upfront for a solar system that will yield returns later, homebuilders and solar industry insiders said. Some production homebuilders who construct for the masses - notably Castle & Cooke and BLU S.K.Y. Homes - heavily promoted solar power during the housing boom. But despite the logic of harnessing the sun's energy in blistering Bakersfield, the companies found solar to be a hard sell.

"Over the life of the house, does it make sense?" asked Pat Henneberry, Castle & Cooke's vice president of Bakersfield housing operations. "Well of course it makes sense. But for the average buyer who may not stay in that house - certainly not for the life of the house - how do we make it attractive?"

AN AL GORE THING

While interest in solar energy is growing, only 1 to 2 percent of newly constructed homes come with photovoltaic panels that convert light into electricity, according to Consol company president Mike Hodgson, a Stockton-based energy consultant to subdivision builders.

"The solar electric systems that go into housing are expensive," he said.

A properly sized solar system for a home of about 1,500 square feet might run \$20,000. To power a bigger home, the price tag may climb to \$50,000.

So typical solar buyers aren't usually young, budget-conscious families. Solar customers are usually looking for their second or third home, said BSW Roofing Contractors co-owner Rick Montoya, who has worked with a licensed solar contractor on a number of Bakersfield reroofing and new construction projects.

"The solar product person is a person who reads the *Wall Street Journal*," Montoya said.

The educated, middle-aged Turney fits the profile of a typical solar customer, said custom homebuilder Phil Gaskill. Gaskill is working with Turney, who plans to build his next house - with a bigger solar system - in Seven Oaks or Southern Oaks.

"It's usually a client that wants to do good," Gaskill said. "It's an Al Gore-type thing."

GIVING SOLAR AWAY

Castle & Cooke found it trickier to attract Al Gore-types to the solar-equipped homes it built in its Windermere subdivision, in the southwest's Seven Oaks at Grand Island.

The homebuilder installed solar systems on about 15 of the 30 homes first built in the new neighborhood, which started selling in December 2005, Henneberry said.

The company had already embraced green building, and solar seemed like a natural next step, he said. But it didn't go over.

"We ended up basically giving those systems away to sell the houses," Henneberry said.

The northeast's City in the Hills development, where builder BLU S.K.Y. Homes originally made solar systems a standard feature on their Juliana's Garden homes, had a similar experience.

In September, in light of the sluggish housing market, the builder backed off making solar automatic, leaving it up to individual buyers to decide, said spokeswoman Cindy Pollard.

The affiliated company that master-developed City in the Hills, Mountain View Bravo LLC, required all builders in the development to offer solar as an option.

"The percentage of takers was very low," Pollard said.

Castle & Cooke stopped making solar a standard feature too, but still offers the systems as optional add-ons at Windermere and its Village Green development, near Renfro Road and Stockdale Highway.

"I think, of course, had we hit the market a year earlier, a lot of things would be different," Henneberry said. Price is paramount for consumers in today's rocky real estate market.

But other factors might brighten the solar purchasing landscape.

Government rebates are a must, Henneberry said, and increased demand will naturally drive prices down. But he also thinks lenders should consider the electricity bill savings a solar system will generate when calculating how big a loan a homebuyer is qualified to receive.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The state is pushing to have builders install solar as a standard feature, instead of giving buyers an option between, say, granite countertops and photovoltaic cells.

Installing solar on all homes in a subdivision, rather than buying systems one at a time, is more likely to be cost-effective for a builder, said Amy Morgan, a spokeswoman for the New Solar Homes Partnership, a \$400 million energy efficiency program managed by the California Energy Commission.

That price break can be paired with rebates, which is about \$7,500 on a 3-kilowatt system, she said.

Rebates are great, but they still aren't enough for standard solar system installations to make financial sense, said Lenox Homes president David Cates.

He figures he needs solar systems installation to average less than \$10,000 per home. A 3-kilowatt system, the right size for the starter homes he builds in Bakersfield, would cost him between \$13,000 and \$15,000, after rebates - a figure that would force him to bump the consumer's price too high, he said.

And Cates is no naysayer. He thinks solar can be affordable for his entry-level buyers, and not just those who build custom homes.

He's actively considering making solar a standard feature on his homes - even if it means hiring and training people to work with the photovoltaic roof panels.

"I don't like the idea of it, but the only way to make it financially viable is to install it," Cates said.

The people who buy Lenox homes, which range in price between \$179,900 and \$246,000, are among those who might most benefit from the utility bill price break solar can offer, he said.

With the rough real estate market, it may take years.

But Cates said he'd embrace solar now, if the right deal comes along.

"And if it doesn't get to me, we'll make our own," he said.

Redevelopment EIR available to public

Lodi News Sentinel, Saturday, April 5, 2008

A draft environmental impact report for the city's proposed Eastside redevelopment district is available to the public.

Redevelopment is a tool cities use to channel property tax toward neighborhood improvements, like fixing sidewalks or upgrading storefronts, and ultimately spurring the economy in that area.

The Lodi City Council will vote this summer whether to approve a redevelopment district. It would stretch generally east of Sacramento Street to the eastern border of the city, but also include eastern stretches of Kettleman Lane and Lodi Avenue.

City consultants have estimated the district could generate \$131 million over its 30-year lifetime.

Critics of redevelopment say the process places cities in too much debt, and funnels property tax away from schools and other services.

The environmental report — prepared by GRC Redevelopment Consultants, Inc. — studied ways redevelopment will affect land use, traffic and air quality, among other topics. A summary of the report said redevelopment will have a "less than significant" or no affect on the above topics.

The report can be picked up at Lodi City Hall, 221 W. Pine St. Call 333-6700 for more information.

Barn design improves dairy air

By Ramona Frances

Madera Tribune, Saturday, April 05, 2008

New technology introduced to help eliminate flies and odors on dairies may get even more attention with recent tightening of air and water regulations.

"We have 59 dairies in Madera County right now. As Madera County grows and we get more dairies moving in, air and water quality issues will have to be addressed at both a state and local level," said Jay Seslowe, assistant agriculture commissioner in Madera County.

Seslowe said there are a few individuals who have innovative answers to air and water quality control.

One example is an enclosed dairy barn designed at a lower height with internal temperature control to eliminate heat and chill stress on cows. The technology was introduced in the county by David Avila of Western Dairy Design Associates.

"Although polyethylene buildings are not new, the design of the barn and air filtration system is. We have applied for patents on those," Avila said.

The polyethylene roofing allows more natural light into the building and cows respond favorably to light, depending on what cycle they are in, by producing more milk. Manure produced by the cows composts within the building and functions as a soft odorless bedding - 80 square feet of bedding area per cow. Cows spend less time standing on concrete and have less stress on their legs, Avila said.

"It's the same for your legs too. Concrete has high-impact, is abrasive to cows' feet and they can slip on wet concrete easily," Avila said.

Avila believes the solution to water and air quality regulations is to use improved dairy buildings that are built lower and wider with insulation and increased air flow due to cross-ventilation technology "instead of the standard tunnel ventilation, which calls for 54 fans turning air in a standard 1,263,000-cubic-foot barn."

"The cows never leave the environment," Avila said. "It's a complete system."

Rail Abandonment Protest Filed, Another to Follow

Valley Voice Newspaper (Visalia), Monday, April 7, 2008

San Joaquin Valley - Claiming that San Joaquin Valley Railroad's application to abandon 30.57 miles of line between Strathmore and Jovista contains incomplete and inaccurate information and

ignores economic and environmental impacts, Tulare County officials have filed their official opposition documents.

The Tulare County Economic Development Corp. and the Tulare County Association of Governments (TCAG) submitted a 34-page document to the Surface Transportation Board in Washington, D.C. Another protest to a secondary SJVR abandonment plan, a nearly nine-mile segment linking Exeter to Strathmore, was to be filed later this week. The commission plans to make a ruling in early June.

In urging the agency to reject the SJVR abandonment plan, the document claims the rail firm ignores the fact that Tulare County “suffers from some of the worst [air quality](#), highest unemployment and greatest poverty in the State of California.”

Reduced rail service, the document states, would force even more reliance on trucking, resulting in more pollutants, more highway and roadway damage, congestion and other issues.

The second SJVR abandonment proposal basically will list the same general issues as the protest to the 30.57-mile abandonment plan, according to Paul Saldana, EDC executive director.

Saldana and others, especially Tulare County Supervisor Allen Ishida, claim the SJVC is seeking abandonment in a piecemeal approach to lessen opposition.

The protest document is openly critical of financial issues raised by the SJVR abandonment petition. The company's imposition, rescinding and re-imposition of the \$950-per-railcar surcharge is targeted in the county's official protest.

Noting that SJVR “wholly neglected” the impact of the \$950 surcharge, the protest document states, “the re-imposition of this prohibitively expensive service effectively ended interest in rail shortly after adoption in April 2006, the last car shipping in October of that year and allowing connecting track north of the line to then be stacked with 200 stored boxcars. This on and off again, prohibitively expensive railroad use depressing freight rate, combined with the uncertainty of continued service has prevented any commitment to rail or investment in rail sidings.”

The EDC, TCAG and county officials say having a viable rail system is crucial to furthering economic growth and that any reduction would cripple efforts for industrial and job expansion.

Included in the protest are a number of letters from cities, the county and several businesses, including Sierra Forest Products, Britz Fertilizers and Tuff Stuff Products.

In its letter, Tuff Stuff Products, a firm manufacturing plastic pellets, cites plans to use rail service. If it could get reliable rail service, a letter from Max Lee, general manager, states the company could use between 10 and 20 carloads per month. “Although we are not currently using the rail ... it is in our intermediate plan to incorporate the rail service in our logistics. I cannot stress enough the importance of a competitive rail service to keep us competitive in the global market.”

Slow Going for N.Y. Traffic Plan

Proposed 'Congestion Pricing' Fees Hit Political Gridlock in Capitol

By Keith B. Richburg

Washington Post, Sunday, April 6, 2008

NEW YORK -- Traversing Manhattan's narrow width at midday can be an excruciatingly slow experience.

There are the delivery trucks unloading their wares. There are the taxis discharging and picking up passengers. There are the double-parked limousines, the lane-hogging tourist buses and the occasional slow-moving garbage truck, all contributing to the city's legendary gridlock.

All that congestion is not just inconvenient, it is costly. According to business experts and others, traffic congestion costs New York about 50,000 jobs and \$13 billion annually in lost productivity. That includes slow deliveries, gasoline wasted in idling vehicles, and the repairmen who can

make only a couple of stops each day. And it doesn't even begin to count the costs to human lungs from breathing in all that pollution.

"The city's the largest it's ever been," said Kathryn Wylde, chief executive of the Partnership for New York City, a business consortium. "There's now a million vehicles a day coming in here, and the capacity to manage it's gone."

To address the problem, New York's powerful business community has formed an unusual alliance with environmentalists, civic groups and commuters' associations in favor of a plan, called congestion pricing, borrowed from another traffic-clogged city, London. It would charge \$8 for cars and \$21 for trucks to enter Manhattan below 60th Street during peak hours. The money would be used to upgrade the city's clogged and in places crumbling mass-transit system.

"There is nothing you can do to improve [air quality](#) as quickly and dramatically as reducing vehicular traffic through congestion pricing," Wylde said. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg embraced the plan on Earth Day last year and made it the signature proposal of his second-term ambition to turn New York into America's greenest and most efficient city by 2030.

Just a few days ago, it appeared that congestion pricing might be close to becoming a reality. The state's new governor, David A. Paterson, signaled his support after intense lobbying from Bloomberg during a meeting at City Hall. And on Monday, the mayor cajoled and strong-armed a reluctant City Council to support the plan on a rare 30 to 20 split vote.

But the plan now seems to have run into serious political gridlock in the state capital, Albany, where lawmakers must also give their consent. Paterson, a Democrat, and state Senate leader Joseph Bruno, a Republican, have backed the idea. But it faces a wall of opposition in the Democratic-controlled state Assembly. Objections include concerns that the fee amounts to a new tax on workers and worries that the dozens of cameras needed to enforce the new restrictions might violate New Yorkers' privacy rights.

In a meeting of Assembly Democrats last week, some members from New York City's outer boroughs expressed wariness that their constituents would be charged extra to drive into Manhattan. "Many of us believe it's a regressive tax on the working class," said Michael Benjamin, an Assembly member from the Bronx. "There's no exception for seniors driving into Midtown to see a specialist."

Polls have shown that a majority of New Yorkers favor congestion pricing, if the money raised from the fees is indeed invested in mass transit. In a recent Quinnipiac University poll, support for the plan was 70 percent in Manhattan and 61 percent in Queens. Backing was lower in Brooklyn, at 56 percent, and in the Bronx, at 57 percent.

Benjamin counts himself as green-friendly; he rides a bike, has traveled on most of the city's subway lines and said he didn't even have a driver's license until 1990, when he was in his 30s. But when he heard that congestion pricing was being pushed because of the successful experiment in London, he said, "The last good thing to come out of Britain was radar."

"I wasn't trying to bash the British," Benjamin said. But, he added: "Britain has been rationing things since 1945. In America, we don't ration things." In other words: Americans like to drive, and sometimes they need to drive into Midtown Manhattan.

Congestion pricing is also in use in Stockholm and Singapore.

The Assembly leader, Democrat Sheldon Silver, will decide Monday whether to bring the question up for a vote. That day marks a federal deadline for the city to receive an extra \$340 million in federal transportation funds, if congestion pricing becomes law by midnight.

Much of the debate has less to do with the merits of congestion pricing than with the intricacies of New York politics. Bloomberg won election as a Republican and last year became an independent, and he has constantly met opposition to his plans in the Democratic-controlled Assembly. "There's a good deal of resistance towards Mike Bloomberg in the legislature," said Gene Russianoff, senior attorney for the Straphangers Campaign, a transit research group.

Benjamin and others said they were moved to oppose congestion pricing after learning that Bloomberg won support for the plan in the City Council with promises of pet projects and political aid in future campaigns -- campaigns that could target Democrats in Albany.

Congestion pricing opponents also have a powerful ally in New Jersey Gov. Jon S. Corzine. A Democrat who touts a strong environmental record, Corzine was angered when the City Council made a change to the plan that he felt would unfairly penalize New Jersey drivers.

Initially, New Jersey's "bridge and tunnel" commuters, as they are called here, would have been exempt from the new congestion fees, since they already pay \$8 in tolls to come into Manhattan. But the council voted to add \$3 to \$4 to that toll, unless the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which controls the bridges and tunnels, agrees to give New York City \$1 billion to fund mass-transit projects.

"I think New Jersey is already paying congestion pricing," Corzine said recently. "The last time I checked, we have an \$8 toll." In a statement, he said, "Unless this plan treats all drivers fairly, I am prepared to pursue legal action to protect New Jersey commuters from this outrageous action."

Proponents have not given up on congestion pricing for Manhattan. They note that in Albany, business often gets done at the last minute, with unrelated bills passing unexpectedly in a series of delicate late-night bargains -- a process known in state political circles as the "big ugly."

Also, Albany-watchers and business representatives said that Paterson, a longtime state senator, has much warmer relations with lawmakers and a better feel for the give-and-take of dealmaking than did former governor Eliot L. Spitzer, who resigned last month after being caught in an FBI investigation of a prostitution ring.

"Both reporters and elected officials only do what they have to do when they're on deadline," Russianoff said.

Rogge: Beijing smog may affect athletes

By Gillian Wong, Associated Press Writer

In the Merced Sun-Star, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Saturday, April 5, 2008

SINGAPORE—Beijing's heavy pollution may hurt the performances of athletes in this summer's Olympic Games, although it will not endanger their health, International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge said Saturday.

The IOC in recent months has acknowledged the possibility that athletes' performances may be affected by China's pollution. But Chinese leaders have made repeated assurances that Beijing's notorious smog will be solved before the Olympic Games begin.

"The health of the athletes is absolutely not in any danger," Rogge said Saturday. "It might be that some will have to have a slightly reduced performance, but nothing will harm the health of the athletes. The IOC will take care of that."

Rogge was asked to comment on the decision by Haile Gebrselassie, the world's greatest distance runner, not to run the men's marathon in Beijing because of worries over pollution.

"Haile Gebrselassie is arguably the best long-distance runner of the present generation," Rogge said, adding however, the runner is "slightly asthmatic."

Rogge was not ruling out the possibility that Gebrselassie could change his mind nearer to the date.

"He decided so far—I'm saying so far because we don't know how things will evolve—not to participate in the marathon," he said. "I would say, wait and see ... when he sees the data that we are providing for them."

Rogge had previously said outdoor events in August's games could be delayed if the air quality was too poor.

Pollution—in addition to the violence in Tibet and other human rights issues—had been a major concern for China and the International Olympic Committee in the leadup to the Aug. 8-24 Olympics. Some athletes are reportedly considering wearing masks to ward off the bad air in Beijing, while many will delay their arrival in China's capital until the last possible moment.

The Tibet protests and other human rights issues had led activists to call for boycotts of the Beijing Olympics, and some high-ranking political leaders—including French President Nicolas Sarkozy—had said they may boycott the opening ceremony.

"We are not seeing a real momentum on boycotts by governments," Rogge said.

"There are talks about the potential boycotts of the opening ceremony.

"It is up to the heads of government to decide if they want to come to Beijing or not."

The early stages of the torch relay had attracted protests by activists, mostly concerned with Tibetan sovereignty, and more were expected as it traveled through western Europe and the United States.

"We are definitely not happy with the protests," Rogge said. "If people want to protest, we are for the freedom of speech and expression. They can protest as long as it is not violent."

Rogge said the IOC executive committee would meet April 10 to examine the latest report by human rights group Amnesty International, which was critical of China's lack of progress on such issues as detention without trial, repression of human right activists and Internet censorship.

Rogge and IOC executive board member Sergei Bubka traveled to Singapore to observe preparations for the first Youth Olympic Games to be held there in 2010. The Youth Games will feature about 3,200 athletes aged 14-18 competing in 26 sports.

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Friday, April 4, 2008:](#)

Sitting in the dark, for an hour can be a really long time

By Dianne Hardisty, Californian Columnist

Where were you when the lights went out in Bakersfield last Saturday night? Likely you were in your well-lighted homes, oblivious to the fact that cities throughout the world were observing "Earth Hour" dousing their lights between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m.

Earth Hour, sponsored by the World Wildlife Federation, wasn't talked up a lot around here. In fact, I learned about the symbolic gesture to draw attention to global warming accidentally. No one seemed interested in spreading the word, or cause in Bakersfield last weekend.

But I was intrigued. There were a few snippets of coverage in the media urging us to unplug from the electricity grid for just one hour. Electricity generation plants produce greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

Earth Hour organizers hoped 100 million people around the world would turn off their lights and unplug nonessential electrical appliances for just one hour to draw attention to the damage these gases cause as they heat the earth.

Why not? I said to Jack, my unimpressed husband, suggesting we, too, observe Earth Hour. I printed out a couple of news reports I found on the Internet. Read these and let me know what you think.

He grumbled: *Can't we do this at 10 or 11, like when we are sleeping? Are we just supposed to sit around in the dark?*

No, it's gotta be at 8. What's the point of turning out the lights when you would turn them out anyway?

At 8 p.m., we doused all the lights in our house and sat with our two dogs in the living room, reading the newspaper in the glow of two flashlights. (OK, maybe that was cheating, but we were off the grid.)

So, did you read the articles? What's this all about? Why are we sitting in the dark?

Without looking up, he responded: *Because you said we had to.*

Come on. What did the articles say?

It's something about global warming. We're supposed to sit in the dark and have a dialogue about this being a problem.

Do you think anyone else in Bakersfield is doing this?

Oh, maybe a few Sierra Clubbers. But some of those guys are often in the dark.

Our neighbors have their lights on. Maybe they don't know about Earth Hour.

Probably not. Why don't you call them? Tell them to turn out their lights. I bet if strangers drive by and see our house dark they'll think we're gone. Maybe they'll break in and rob us.

Jack didn't seem to be taking Earth Hour well. I'm sure we were not having the dialogue organizers envisioned.

Earth Hour began in Sydney, Australia, where the landmark Opera House and Harbour Bridge were darkened. It spread hour by hour through time zones, bringing darkness to Rome's Colosseum and dousing lights in China. Chicago's Sears Tower went dark, as did San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. Individuals, businesses and government agencies in big and little cities throughout the world embraced Earth Hour.

With the U.S. credited with being the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases, there is a lot of debate over the "existence" of global warming. But to admit its existence would require U.S. leaders to commit to doing something about it. While both Republican and Democratic presidential candidates have made that commitment, the Bush administration has been more reticent.

I'm not a scientist. And I admit to having been more than a little bored watching Al Gore's movie, "An Inconvenient Truth." But I have noticed an excessive amount of hot air let's call it "blowhard gases" expended in the debate over global warming.

Instead of arguing, we should talk about and do something about what we can agree on:

[Pollution](#) air, water, whatever is bad. We need to reduce it.

Energy conservation is good. It saves money. It reduces our dependence on foreign oil. And, by the way, it reduces the production of greenhouse gases.

So what are we arguing about?

[S.F. Chronicle commentary, Monday, April 7, 2008:](#)

Back to the future - Bus Rapid Transit

By Henry Gardner

For much of the 20th century, the Key System was the way for Bay Area commuters to travel across the bay and up and down the East Bay. An ingenious, interconnected system of streetcars, bus lines and trains allowed you to step out your front door and journey throughout the region.

At its height in the 1940s, the Key System, or Key Route as it was known, operated more than 66 miles of track that connected the burgeoning cities of Richmond, Albany, Berkeley, Oakland, San Leandro and even San Francisco via the lower deck of the Bay Bridge. It was a transit system designed to promote efficiency and ease of movement for a region on a war footing. The Key System offered an encouraging glimpse of how truly great mass transit could be. But cheap gasoline and the hypnotic culture of the car in America doomed such smart transit system planning, shelving it as an afterthought for decades.

It is now time to go back to the future.

Over the next 30 years, the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) projects the population of the Bay Area will rise by 2 million people, and jobs will increase by 1.5 million. Alameda County's population alone is expected to jump by 28 percent. This growth is expected to produce greater urban density, not more suburban sprawl. But denser urban cores will require ways of transporting people quickly and efficiently without putting more cars on the road. The solution: a Key Route for the 21st century using the most cost-effective, environmentally friendly mass transit vehicle - a bus.

Not just any bus, but a faster, cleaner one, with zero or low-emissions technology in a system known as Bus Rapid Transit. Fortunately, in perhaps the boldest bus project in the region, AC Transit is proposing to do just that by re-inventing its busiest bus line, the 1R. The idea is to make it a fast, reliable transit option for commuters along the Oakland/Berkeley/San Leandro corridor, an area of 320,000 people and some of the densest residential neighborhoods in the region. The BRT would use lanes dedicated to buses only - likely the center-most lane - in order to reduce passenger wait times and to enhance streetscapes with functional and beautiful depots, complete with shelters, boarding platforms, benches, fare machines and real-time bus arrival information.

Critics point to the effects on automobile use as reasons to oppose the project. But some difficult trade-offs will need to be made to improve public transit and improve traffic flow, even if there are impacts on motorists. The East Bay BRT project is expected to reduce auto travel by 9,300 trips per day and reduce vehicle travel by 21,000 miles per day. This would reduce overall traffic and cut air pollution, including greenhouse-gas emissions - something we've set out to do as a state

with the climate change law, AB32. However, motorists may be inconvenienced by the removal of on-street parking at BRT station locations and by slower automobile speeds on the street.

Indeed, it's a Key System for the future that complements ABAG's vision of getting local governments to rethink the link between transportation and land use, and embrace modern growth philosophies. By the year 2020, people are projected to make some 255,000 daily trips to reach major employment centers and educational institutions in the East Bay. If the majority of these trips are made by car, the ensuing traffic congestion will make it impossible to enjoy life as we now know it. Already, the average speed of East Bay buses has declined at a rate of 1 percent per year for the past 20 years, now averaging only 11 miles an hour.

In the proposed BRT corridor, it takes up to 90 minutes to travel 18 miles from Berkeley to San Leandro by bus, but those times can be vastly reduced with the advent of bus rapid transit lanes. Unlike light-rail systems, building a new Key Route for buses would cost substantially less because it does not require laying rails or installing overhead electric wires. And with the cost of oil soaring beyond \$100 a barrel, the economic logic here is unmistakable.

Growth demands new approaches to how we plan our cities, incorporating lessons from the past that were learned but regrettably forgotten. AC Transit's BRT is a solution to the region's approaching energy and density crisis. If you live here or otherwise use our badly snarled roadways, you surely have seen the future in front of you - or in your rearview mirror. It's the bus, and it's time to get on board.

Henry Gardner is the executive director of the Association of Bay Area Governments and former city manager of Oakland.

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the American Lung Association of California recognizes a Mexican Businessman for his contributions using solar energy on both sides of the border. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Premia Asociación de salud Pulmonar a mexicano por impulsar uso de energía solar

Manuel Ocaño

Radio Bilingüe, Monday, April 7, 2008

La Asociación de salud Pulmonar (American Lung Association) de California reconoció este fin de semana a un empresario de México por sus contribuciones al usar la energía solar en ambos lados de la frontera.

La referida asociación reconoció al empresario, Saúl García Huerta, de Tijuana, Baja California, quien es productor de rejillas y transformadores de energía solar, por impulsar un plan que generará unos 500 megavatios de electricidad domiciliar y comercial.

Dicha energía equivale al consumo diario de casi 150 mil viviendas, pero además evita generar esa energía con termoeléctricas que de acuerdo con la asociación pulmonar producirían cientos de toneladas de contaminantes del aire anualmente, y provocarían daños a la salud de residentes de la región.

