

SUN, WATER & SEWER GAS

A triple play for federal stimulus funds

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor
Manteca Bulletin Tues. Sept. 2, 2009

Sewer gas, the sun's rays, and the power of water are being combined in a package deal to land federal stimulus funds being awarded for renewable energy projects.

Manteca is teaming up with the City of Ripon, and the South San Joaquin Irrigation District in a bid to improve the chances of the South County landing money to help offset the cost of three separate energy projects designed to [reduce air pollution](#), increase green power production, and reduce the cost of electricity for municipal and private purposes. The Department of Energy is looking for large projects that combine several renewable components.

Manteca is pursuing a methane gas cogeneration project at the wastewater treatment plant, Ripon a solar project, and SSJID a hydroelectric project.

Manteca's city leaders Tuesday authorized a letter of commitment to be sent to the federal government. And in the event there is a matching component, staff has identified \$427,000 that could be used in the sewer maintenance and operation account. Staff has indicated that other projects could be delayed to make the co-generation component work. In return, the co-generation plant would pay for itself in five years and free up money that would have gone to electrical payments to PG&E to backfill capital improvement projects.

Manteca Public Works Director Mark Houghton is working with a firm that would collect methane gas—a byproduct of the wastewater treatment process — and store it until peak power times and use it to operate a co-generation plant to flatten power loads and reduce the municipal PG&E bill.

Power costs figure heavily into sewer rates that take monthly residential rates up from \$33.06 to \$51.25 by 2013. That reflects a rate increase over the five years in excess of 50 percent.

The increases are being attributed to skyrocketing energy costs — the plant uses \$1.1 million in electricity in a given year — as well as other needs such as:

- building the operating reserve up to the equivalent of four months.
- creating a depreciation sinking fund to replace several thousand feet of aging large pipeline that is nearing the end of its useful life.
- meeting more stringent state standards that are now in place for the collection and treatment of wastewater.

Making the route to school safer

By Elisabeth Nardi, Walnut Creek Journal

In the Contra Costa Times, Tri-Valley Herald and other papers, Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009

A state grant may mean a safer walk to school for students at Buena Vista Elementary.

The California Department of Transportation awarded \$48.5 million for 106 Safe Routes to School projects recently, to keep children heading to school safe. Walnut Creek and Lafayette were the only two cities in Contra Costa County to receive state funding.

Walnut Creek received \$420,000 to upgrade the intersection of Buena Vista Avenue and Parkside Drive. The improvements include new sidewalks, realigning of crosswalks, curbed ramps and realigning the intersection. The entire cost of the project was estimated at \$679,560, and the city is required to match 10 percent of the funds Caltrans allots. Walnut Creek plans to pay for more than 20 percent of the project, or around \$100,000, said Rafat Raie, Walnut Creek traffic engineer. The city's portion came from traffic impact fee revenue, he said.

While the improvements will aid those students and parents who walk to Buena Vista, it will also help another group of people — those heading to and from nearby Walnut Creek BART, said Raie.

"There are many different people not only kids who walk this area," said Raie. "What's really critical about this intersection is it serves pedestrians of all ages "... people from that neighborhood and those that don't live there but park there."

One of the changes includes improving the intersection of Buena Vista and Parkside so when buses can more easily turn, said Raie.

Getting this grant is particularly exciting for the city because Walnut Creek has lost out in the past and the competition for Safe Route to School grants is high, he said. Project design has already begun and the improvements will "hopefully" be done before the start of next school year, said Raie.

California was the first state in the country to legislate its own Safe Routes to School program with dedicated funding from the State Highway Account in 1999. The program aims to encourage children to walk and bicycle to school, resulting in healthier children, improved air quality, reduced fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions and less traffic congestion near schools, according to a press release.

"Safety is Caltrans' number one priority," said Director Randy Iwasaki. "Nothing is more important than the safety of our children as they travel to and from school."

Also set to receive \$297,000 for various street improvements is Lafayette. Springhill Elementary, Stanley Middle and Acalanes High School will all see pedestrian improvements such as raised sidewalks, curbed ramps, better bike routes and new signs.

Bay Area pollution plan subject of Oakland public meeting

By Denis Cuff

Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009

Pollution plan to be discussed: A proposal to clean up air pollution in the nine Bay Area counties will be explained and discussed at a public workshop from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Thursday in Oakland at the MetroCenter auditorium, 101 Eighth St.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District and regional planning and transportation agencies came up with a list of potential restrictions, incentives, and voluntary measures to curb smog, fine particles and greenhouse gases from cars, industries and homes. The measures range from pollution restrictions on composting facilities and oil refineries to offering rebates to replace gas lawn mowers with electric models.

A copy of the draft plan can be viewed at www.baaqmd.gov/Divisions/Planning-and-Research/Plans/Clean-Air-Plans.aspx.

Forest Service investigates fire's cause

By Jacob Adelman

O.C. Register, San Diego Union-Tribune and other papers, Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009

LOS ANGELES—Investigators gathered along a remote road in a blackened forest Wednesday and hunted for clues at the spot where a blaze ignited more than a week ago and grew into one of the largest wildfires in Southern California history.

Three U.S. Forest Service investigators spent most of the day beneath a partially burned oak tree at the bottom of a ravine, believed to be the spot where the fire started. One investigator shook soil in a can.

Deputy incident commander Carlton Joseph said Wednesday morning the fire was "human-caused," meaning it could have been ignited by items such as a dropped cigarette or a spark from a lawn mower. Forest Service officials later said they are looking at all possible causes.

"If there's no power lines that's something we can rule ... out. We can rule out lightning if that's not a factor. We can rule out vehicles if that's not a factor. But we will not make a definitive determination until we rule that out," Forest Service commander Rita Wears said. "The only thing I can say (is) it is possibly human activity."

The investigation unfolded as firefighters helped by higher humidity and lack of wind made more progress against the wildfire that had burned nearly 219 square miles, or 140,150 acres, of the Angeles National Forest by Wednesday.

Firefighters said they have the blaze 28 percent contained, largely by removing brush with bulldozers and setting controlled burns. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger served breakfast to firefighters Wednesday, scooping Cream of Wheat into paper bowls so, "They get all pumped up for the next fight out there with those fires."

Since erupting Aug. 26, the blaze has destroyed more than five dozen homes, killed two firefighters and forced thousands of people from their homes.

The fire also cast a smoky haze over the region and gave the night sky an eerie glow. The smoke affected air quality in Las Vegas and combined with soot from local fires to block mountain views in Denver.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca said 50 homes in his jurisdiction remained under mandatory evacuation, down from 4,000 Tuesday. He said 2,000 homes in city jurisdiction were under mandatory evacuation orders.

Melba Cordero, 42, said she and her four children arrived at a shelter Sunday after being evacuated from her Tujunga Canyon home.

"The heat was intense, and the air was very poor," she said as her children, ages 12, 10, 6 and 3, played with teddy bears and coloring books.

"When is it going to end? When can we go back?" she asked. "The kids have school next week. We should be getting them ready for school."

Feds didn't clear brush in wildfire area

By Michael R. Blood, The Associated Press

In San Diego Union-Tribune, L.A. Daily News and other papers, Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009

LOS ANGELES — Federal authorities failed to follow through on plans earlier this year to burn away highly flammable brush in a forest on the edge of Los Angeles to avoid the very kind of wildfire now raging there, The Associated Press has learned.

Months before the huge blaze erupted, the U.S. Forest Service obtained permits to burn away the undergrowth and brush on more than 1,700 acres of the Angeles National Forest. But just 193 acres had been cleared by the time the fire broke out, Forest Service resource officer Steve Bear said.

The agency defended its efforts, saying weather, wind and environmental rules tightly limit how often these "prescribed burns" can be conducted.

Bear said crews using machinery and hand tools managed to trim 5,000 acres in the forest this year before the money ran out. Ideally, "at least a couple thousand more acres" would have been cleared.

Could more have been done to clear tinder-dry hillsides and canyons?

"We don't necessarily disagree with that," Bear said. "We weren't able to complete what we wanted to do."

Some critics suggested that protests from environmentalists over prescribed burns contributed to the disaster, which came after the brush was allowed to build up for as much as 40 years.

"This brush was ready to explode," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich, whose district overlaps the forest. "The environmentalists have gone to the extreme to prevent controlled burns, and as a result we have this catastrophe today."

Prescribed burns are intended to protect homes and lives by eliminating fuel that can cause explosive wildfires. The wildfire that has blackened 140,000 acres – or nearly 219 square miles – in the forest over the past week has been fed by the kind of tinder-dry vegetation that prescribed burns are designed to safely devour.

The blaze has destroyed more than five dozen homes, killed two firefighters and forced thousands of people to flee. Firefighters reported modest progress Wednesday as investigators said the blaze was human-caused, though it was not clear exactly how the fire started or whether it was accidental or arson.

Figures from the California's South Coast Air Quality Management District suggested even less was protectively burned.

The agency said it granted six permits sought by the Forest Service to conduct prescribed burns on 1,748 acres in the forest this year. The agency reviews such requests to ensure air quality in the often-smoggy Los Angeles area will not be worsened by smoke from intentional fires.

But records show only 12.8 acres burned.

Four of the permits, totaling 1,257 acres, were granted in areas involved in the wildfire, according to the air quality agency.

But the Forest Service disputed those figures. Bear said 193 acres were cleared by intentionally set fires.

Government firefighters set thousands of blazes each year to reduce the wildfire risk in overgrown forests and grasslands around the nation. Prescribed burns can also be used to improve overall forest health and increase forage for wildlife.

Obtaining the necessary permits is a complicated process, and such efforts often draw protests from environmentalists.

Biologist Ilene Anderson with the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental organization, said burn permits should be difficult to get because of the potential damage to air quality.

Clearing chaparral by hand or machine must be closely scrutinized because it can hurt native species.

"Our air quality, for a variety of factors, doesn't need to be further reduced by these controlled burns," she said.

Setting pre-emptive fires can be especially risky near heavily populated urban areas like Los Angeles because of the danger of flames burning out of control. Last month, a 90-acre prescribed burn near Foresta, on the edge of Yosemite National Park, jumped fire lines and consumed more than 7 square miles in the park.

Angeles National Forest Supervisor Jody Noiron defended the agency's efforts to reduce the fire risk. "The Angeles Forest has been pretty aggressive about implementing fuels-reduction projects with the funds we are given," she said.

She said that it is extraordinarily difficult to get the right weather conditions to pull off a prescribed burn. "This year with the weather and the drought and all of that, the last couple of years actually, we've had very few days that we can do prescribed burning," she said.

Los Angeles fire Capt. Steve Ruda said that pre-emptive fires were used more frequently in the region in the 1980s. But a growing backcountry population and increasingly complicated environmental rules have made them less frequent.

Conducting a prescribed burn requires a detailed study of wind, terrain, temperature and humidity and reviews by a host of government entities, including air-quality regulators.

Max Moritz, co-director of the Center for Fire Research and Outreach at the University of California at Berkeley, said there is wide discussion about the need to do more prescribed burns to reduce the fire hazard. But "you have this difficult needle you have to thread to find the right place, the right conditions, to pull it off," Moritz said.

Ultimately, he said, the answer is to stop building in fire-prone areas instead of spending huge sums on firefighting.

Steve Brink, a vice president with the California Forestry Association, an industry group, said as many as 8 million acres of national forest in California are overgrown and at risk of wildfire. He said that too few

days provide the conditions necessary for larger, prescribed burns and that the Forest Service needs to speed up programs to thin forests, largely by machine.

"Special interest groups that don't want them to do it have appeals and litigation through the courts to stall or stop any project they wish. Consequently, the Forest Service is not able to put a dent in the problem," Brink said.

Fire prompts evacuations, but crews make progress

By Raquel Maria Dillon, Associated Press Writer

Modesto Bee and other papers, Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009

Firefighters brought a sprawling wildfire near Los Angeles under greater control Thursday, despite a flare-up in a remote canyon that prompted about 25 nearby residents to be evacuated.

The blaze was 38 percent contained Thursday morning, up from 28 percent the previous day. The fire now measures 144,743 acres, or 226 square miles, and is one of the largest wildfires in Southern California history.

Despite the overall progress, firefighters encountered a flare-up in the canyon as strong downslope winds "just kind of blew the fire up," said U.S. Forest Service official John Huschke. Twenty-five people in 11 homes were evacuated.

"Everything else looks really good," he said.

Some 12,000 homes in foothill communities below the fire's southeastern edge officially remained threatened, although other communities farther west that were under siege for days were out of danger.

The forecast called for hot and dry weather in the next couple days, with Thursday's high hovering around 100 in the fire area, the National Weather Service said.

The wildfire, now in its eighth day, destroyed 64 homes, burned three people and left two firefighters dead. During the night, a firefighter injured his leg when he fell 20 foot from a cliff and was taken to a hospital by a medical helicopter, officials said. He was in stable condition.

Full containment was expected Sept. 15, meaning fire officials expect that they will have the blaze completely surrounded by then.

Many homes were saved, but damaged areas looked like war zones to some returning evacuees.

"It's like, is this really our house? Is it really still here?" T.J. Lynch said about returning to his home in the Tujunga neighborhood late Wednesday. "Because we had made peace with the fact that we'd never see our stuff again."

"It looks like nothing changed, but when the sun comes up tomorrow, I expect we'll see the hills blackened and gray," the screenwriter said. "We'll hike up the hill and see how close it came to our neighbors."

Officials said they were pleased with the progress, but said they have much more work ahead.

"We're changing the pace and treating this as a marathon," U.S. Forest Service incident commander Mike Dietrich said. "If it were a 26-mile race, we'd only be at mile six."

The search for what sparked the blaze intensified Wednesday when U.S. Forest Service investigators gathered along a road in a blackened forest to hunt for clues near where the fire started. They shook soil in a can and planted red, blue and yellow flags to mark evidence beneath a partially burned oak tree at the bottom of a ravine.

Deputy incident commander Carlton Joseph said the fire was "human-caused," meaning it could have been started by anything from a dropped cigarette to a spark from something like a lawn mower. Forest Service officials said there was no lightning in the area at the time and no power lines in the vicinity, but later backtracked on Joseph's comments, saying they are looking at all possible causes.

"The only thing I can say is it is possibly human activity," Forest Service Commander Rita Wears said.

The fire also cast a smoky haze over the Los Angeles area and gave the night sky an eerie glow. The smoke spread throughout the West, affecting [air quality](#) in Las Vegas and combining with soot from local fires to block mountain views in Denver.

Weather helping fight against massive L.A. blaze

Sacramento Bee, September 2, 2009

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Firefighters made more progress Wednesday against a giant wildfire that has ravaged a national forest north of Los Angeles, with another day of cooperative weather providing a big assist to beleaguered fire crews.

The blaze in the Angeles National Forest had burned nearly 219 square miles, or 140,150 acres, by early Wednesday. Firefighters have created a perimeter around 22 percent of the blaze, largely by removing brush with bulldozers and setting controlled burns. Bulldozers still have 95 miles of fire line to build.

"The crews are making excellent progress based on the improved weather conditions," U.S. Forest Service incident commander Mike Dietrich at a Wednesday news conference.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger planned to visit the fire area Wednesday morning. Since erupting Aug. 26, the blaze has destroyed more than five dozen homes, killed two firefighters and forced thousands of people from their homes. The cause was still not known.

Officials also were keeping a close eye on the wind, which had been calm overnight but could pick up Wednesday afternoon and move flames closer to homes and a historic observatory. Mount Wilson is currently strongly defended.

U.S. Forest Service incident commander Mike Dietrich was not willing to say a corner had been turned.

In a hillside neighborhood of Glendale, Frank Virgallito stood in a group anxiously watching a controlled burn edge toward their neighborhood.

Virgallito said he and his neighbors had been on high alert since Friday but ignored a voluntary evacuation.

"You don't sleep well," Virgallito said. "I get up every hour and a half or two hours to get a good view of where the fire is. For four days we've been a little sleep-deprived. It's unnerving."

Virgallito said he saw deer, coyote and skunks scampering down his street away from the heat and ash of the smoldering wilderness.

Officials also worried about the threat to a historic observatory and TV, radio and other antennas on Mount Wilson northeast of Los Angeles. But on Tuesday, firefighters set backfires near the facilities before a giant World War II-era seaplane-turned-air tanker made a huge water drop on flames inching toward the peak from the north and west.

By nightfall, 150 firefighters and engines were stationed at the peak to defend the towers, said fire spokesman Paul Lowenthal.

The flames crossed the Angeles Crest Highway into the San Gabriel Wilderness to the east on Tuesday, Lowenthal said. Firefighters made progress on fire breaks to the north near Acton and southwest from Altadena to the Sunland neighborhood.

Firefighters and longtime residents know it could be so much worse. Autumn is the season for the ferocious Santa Ana winds to sweep in from the northeastern deserts, gaining speed through narrow mountain canyons, sapping moisture from vegetation and pushing flames farther out into the suburbs.

"If we had Santa Anas, we still have all this open land here on the western flank and islands of vegetation would throw embers into the air, which would blow down to the homes," Fire spokesman Henry Martinez said, his voice trailing off as he imagined the worst-case scenario. "Let's hope that doesn't happen."

The wildfire season usually doesn't gather steam until the winds hit in October, but the Station fire has been driven by dryness instead of wind. The region is in the midst of a three-year drought, and the tinder-dry forest is ripe for an explosive fire.

Fire officials said 12,000 homes were threatened, but as evacuations are lifted, that number will likely fall. Smoke billowed thousands of feet up in the air, forming what firefighters call an "ice cap," which dissipated and was pushed east for at least 800 miles.

In Colorado, smoke from the Station Fire combined with soot from local fires to block mountain views from Denver.

"That really speaks to the columns of smoke and how much burning was going on," said Norv Larson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Grand Junction, Colo.

"I've put haze in the forecast. I don't see it ending anytime soon," Larson said. "We've got our fires here, you've got your fires there."

Flames charred other parts of Southern California, including one that burned at least 1.5 square miles in the San Bernardino County community of Oak Glen and another that threatened 400 homes in Yucaipa and was at 70 percent containment.

"There's action everywhere," Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said as a helicopter interrupted his comments at a news conference in San Bernardino County.

Lance Williams, 49, managed to save his aunt's home in Delta Flats, a remote community tucked in a canyon in the Angeles National Forest, but returned Tuesday to find his neighbors' homes in ashes.

"It looked like hell," Williams said. "The fire was creating its own winds. There was no way of predicting which way it would go."

He said he used a water pump to fight off the firestorm that raced down hillsides into the canyon. By the time he ran out of water, fire crews had arrived to defend the home that had been in his family since 1945.

Near the remains of house, the charred frames of animal cages swayed in a light wind. In one of the cages, the remains of three small dogs were found.

The massive fire also took a toll on firefighters who bunk down each night in tents at the huge fire command center. Glendale firefighter-paramedic Jack Hayes, 31, said he had not taken a day off for a week.

"You can't sleep," said Hayes, who had the beginnings of a beard and bloodshot eyes. "You're ready to go and there's always something you could be doing."

Two firefighters — Capt. Tedmund Hall, 47, of San Bernardino and firefighter Specialist Arnaldo "Arnie" Quinones, 35, of Palmdale — were killed Sunday when their vehicle plummeted off a mountain road. Quinones' wife is expecting a child soon, and Hall had a wife and two adult children.

Football to go on despite poor air

Clay Fowler, Staff Writer

L.A. Daily News, Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009

The air will likely be the only thing whose quality is in question when the high school football season kicks off tonight.

With school - and, therefore, football practice - beginning earlier this year in most districts, some teams have been preparing for tonight for nearly a month.

"We just want to play a real football game," Los Osos High School coach Tom Martinez said. "We're ready to hit somebody else."

In the marquee game tonight, Los Osos, a CIF-SS Central Division semifinalist last season, will host a Colony team a year removed from consecutive CIF titles.

While each team has already been practicing weeks longer than they are accustomed to prior to their first game, they got a break this week.

With air quality in question due to wildfires, each team moved practice inside its gym on Wednesday. It was the third consecutive day inside for Los Osos, whose campus is nestled against the San Gabriel Mountains.

"It's pretty limiting," Martinez said. "You can't get up to full speed and you can't take anybody to the ground."

The teams flirted with moving the game to Colony's campus but decided the air quality wasn't much different in south Ontario than north Rancho Cucamonga.

Garey's game scheduled for tonight at Azusa was canceled due to the wildfires as was Pomona's Friday game against Alhambra Keppel at Ganesha High School.

Los Osos quarterback Blake Loncar is hoping to create some quality air of his own when the senior throws his first varsity pass tonight. Undefeated in 20 games as the junior varsity starter, Loncar waited patiently behind Richard Brehaut before the three-year starter departed to UCLA.

Loncar is just one of 15 new starters for Los Osos.

Only five new starters will be making their debut for Colony, a reward for enduring some growing pains during a 5-6 season in 2008. Colony head coach Anthony Rice is eager to see how much his team has grown up in the past nine months.

He likely won't have to wait long considering his nonleague schedule consists of four 2008 playoff teams, including CIF finalist Diamond Ranch and a Los Osos team that won 10 games.

"You can learn a lot from a game like this," Rice said. "We're kind of backed into a corner after last season so we want to see how the kids respond."

Quarterback Travis Nelson won the starting job for Colony a year after losing it following the Titans' 0-3 start. His replacement last season, then-sophomore Kori Grant, ironically will be lining up for the opposition tonight after transferring to Los Osos over the summer.

Grant will play wide receiver for the Grizzlies.

Though it sustained heavy losses to graduation, Los Osos isn't as young this season as Colony was in 2008. While not short on seniority, the Grizzlies are short on experience.

Several high school teams won't begin their season until a week from Friday.

Los Osos and Colony are glad they don't have to hold out that long.

"It'll be a very exciting game for us," Martinez said.

Rest stops get 'green' facelifts

By Haya El Nasser

USA TODAY, Thursday, Sept. 3, 2009

POMPANO BEACH, Fla. — Heading south on Florida's Turnpike, one of the last pit stops near the end of the road is here at Milepost 65. Much like the seven other gas-and-food rest areas on the 312-mile toll road, the Pompano Service Plaza was built in the 1950s, got a makeover in the '80s and now looks like it badly needs a facelift.

It will be getting that and more when four of the eight service plazas on the turnpike are torn down and rebuilt and others remodeled.

The real stunner: They will be "green" and built to strict environmental standards.

Environmental consciousness is sprouting along one of the greatest symbols of America's love affair with the automobile: the turnpike.

The folks that help millions of cars and trucks move across the nation — big producers of greenhouse gas emissions — are slowly turning from environmental villains to green heroes. Using goats to keep roadside grass trimmed is one extreme used on a small scale in several states. More significant efforts focus on service plazas, gas stations and toll collections.

"The consciousness about greenhouse gas reductions is fairly new among departments of transportation," says Larry Yermack, president of Telvent Transportation North America, which develops tolling systems. "In the next few years, you're going to see lots and lots more."

Cars and light trucks produce 14% of greenhouse gas emissions, according to industry estimates. So turnpike and road authorities are embracing all things "green":

- Massachusetts wants to build a wind-turbine project on state land adjacent to its turnpike's Blandford Rest Area, near Springfield. "We want our highways and roads to be as green as they can be," said state Transportation Secretary James Aloisi when it was announced in April.

The Massachusetts Turnpike also uses biofuels in heating systems at maintenance depots and ultralow-sulfur diesel in generators and trucks. E-85 fuels — 85% ethanol and 15% gasoline — will be sold at four service plazas.

- Headquarters of the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission in Harrisburg was the first "green" state building in the Keystone State. About 10% of the turnpike's electricity is supplied by wind farms and more than 600 vehicles in its fleet use biodiesel.

The state also is rebuilding travel plazas. They will meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards, a respected certification by the U.S. Green Building Council.

- Electronic toll collections, which cut down on toll booths, traffic backups and exhaust-spewing idling cars, now are being used by most toll agencies but still account for only about 60% of all toll transactions, according to Patrick Jones, executive director of the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association.

"Tolling in general is becoming more green by virtue of using automatic toll collection," Jones says.

Another green benefit: The cost of paying tolls may reduce driving or encourage carpooling, says Steven Snider, CEO of Halifax Harbor Bridges, a toll authority in Nova Scotia.

The association's fall conference will focus on sustainability, social responsibility and energy conservation — a first for the trade group.

"The introduction of electronic toll collection has done two things: It's had a significant environmental impact and it has also helped us better use existing facilities," says Snider, who is organizing the conference.

In Florida, the greening effort has been spurred by Gov. Charlie Crist's campaign to reduce greenhouse gases and increase energy efficiency.

The turnpike is working with the University of Florida to study the use of solar energy at its Turkey Lake Service Plaza in Orange County.

When Florida's Turnpike signed a new concession contract last spring, it required the company to upgrade and rebuild the service plazas to comply with LEED standards. Areas USA, which runs concessions at major airports around the world, hired Zyscovich Architects, a Miami-based firm known for urban and green designs.

For many who travel Florida's Turnpike, the service plazas are "their first vision of what Florida is all about," says architect Bernard Zyscovich. "They're going to be places ... more oriented to leave a lasting image."

What's in store: High ceilings and glass to let in natural light; an outdoor seating area landscaped with indigenous plants that don't require irrigation; non-toxic paints and adhesives; recyclable stones, tiles and wood made of native materials; video terminals and varied seating arrangements to break up the visual monotony; healthier food alternatives. The larger plazas will even have sit-down, full-service restaurants. "We think of it as an oasis," Zyscovich says.

In the late 1940s and early '50s, people drove on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and stopped to picnic in the median, says Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. "The car was seen as the thing that could bring you closest to nature. This is kind of a return-to-nature theme."

Napa bus will have engine similar to Prius'

By Kelly Zito, staff writer

S.F. Chronicle, Wednesday, Sept. 2, 2009

Kids in Napa won't hear the usual "clackety clack" of a diesel engine when district bus HY-2 lumbers up to their stop next month.

In fact, when the bus is sitting still, they won't hear anything at all.

Within a week or two, Napa Valley Unified School District will premiere one of the first small hybrid buses in the nation, thanks to state grants aimed at curbing school bus emissions and a transportation manager's aggressive campaign to green his fleet.

"I just got tired of seeing the commercials with the big puff of black smoke coming out of the tailpipe of school buses," said Ralph Knight, transportation supervisor for the 17,000-student school district.

Bus HY-2 is technically the second hybrid the district owns, but it is the first in California to use an engine similar to that of the Toyota Prius, which relies on both gasoline and electricity. The bus, which will carry children with special needs, will get an estimated 15 miles to the gallon, up from about 10 miles.

The district's first hybrid, a standard-size plug-in, was purchased in 2007 - the first, and until now, the only other hybrid school bus in use in California, according to state air regulators. It was one of only a handful produced through the work of a North Carolina nonprofit that promotes sustainable energy.

Officials at Collins Bus Corp., the South Hutchinson, Kan., firm that made HY-2, hope to find a broader audience for their hybrid.

"This is a great application for schools," said John Doswell, vice president of sales and marketing at Collins. "Most of these buses sit in line waiting to pick up the kids at the end of the day, and they're belching fumes. These don't run while they're stopped at all."

Still, with a price tag of more than \$140,000, the Collins bus isn't affordable to most California school districts, which are facing steep cuts to transportation budgets as part of the state's effort close a gaping budget hole. Knight said a conventional small bus costs almost half that of HY-2 - about \$76,000.

That's where California policymakers seem to be at cross-purposes, according to school transportation officials. Amid the cutbacks, school districts are also required to replace or retrofit many of their diesel buses by 2018 as part of the state's sweeping plan to reduce school bus pollution and to slash overall carbon emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

Studies by the California Air Resources Board show that while traveling in buses with windows closed, children are exposed to pollution at significantly higher levels than in the air surrounding the bus.

"Frankly, you'd see a lot more hybrid buses, but school districts are having a hard time putting any bus on the road at this point," said Ron Kinney, executive secretary for the California School Transportation Association in Sacramento. "What Ralph has been able to put together is pretty rare."

Knight, whose fleet also includes more than 30 buses that run on compressed natural gas, is thankful some state bond money for bus purchases still remains (local and state grants effectively paid for the HY-2). In 2006, Californians voted to spend \$200 million to upgrade and swap out older diesel buses. So far, \$83 million has been disbursed; officials are waiting for sale of additional bonds to fund the rest.

"If it wasn't for the grant money, we wouldn't be able to do this," Knight said.

Not one to stop there, Knight is now talking with Ford about developing a car for the school district that would be powered by a fuel cell, a device that uses an electrochemical reaction. Typical hydrogen fuel cells give off not carbon dioxide but water vapor.

"You have to dig and dig and turn over rocks to make this happen," Knight said.

[Manteca Bulletin editorial Sunday, Aug. 30, 2009:](#)

Uncle Sam is an enabler of the worst kind

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor

Uncle Sam is turning into the relative who undermines good parenting by lavishing kids with expensive gifts, giving them candy before dinner and letting them stay up until all hours of the night and ignore basic disciplines like doing you homework and chores.

There is now a proposal for Uncle Sam to offer “Cash for Appliances” to encourage people to buy energy efficient appliances. This little chunk of the stimulus act money comes to \$300 million.

Whatever happened to people doing the right thing without getting additional financial rewards from Uncle Sam?

I've got to be honest here. I bought my Ford Escape hybrid a little over three years ago because I thought it was the right thing to do. Two weeks later, Congress adopted a \$2,500 tax credit for buying a hybrid. The extra cost didn't pencil out at the time for gas savings – it does now – but that wasn't my main concern. It was about reducing [air pollution](#). If you don't think we have a personal obligation to improve air quality, spend a summer in Bakersfield where people toil to raise much of the food we eat. That ugly air is partially the fault of everyone here.

I also closed escrow on my house less than a year before Uncle Sam started tossing out \$8,000 for free. It made sense for me to buy when I did even though the market dropped farther. It was the responsible thing to do.

Now, just a week after buying an energy and water efficient washing machine I now find that Uncle Sam is going to give away more money to folks who buy energy efficient washing machines and other appliances.

Yes, I'm in line to get a \$100 rebate from the City of Manteca water division and a \$75 rebate from PG&E. In both cases, though as a ratepayer I'm paying money into those funds. Essentially I'm getting money back that I've paid as part of my basic bill. It is a strategy that encourages ratepayers to reduce the need for costly expansions of power and water sources. In the case of Uncle Sam, our great-grandkids will be picking up the tab.

Even with the rebates, it will take me a couple of years to recoup the savings over a conventional washing machine. That's fine. We all have an obligation to do what we can when we can to conserve resources.

Uncle Sam – if he is really concerned about reducing energy consumption – should simply outlaw the sale of appliances that don't meet specific energy miser standards. Just like with hybrid vehicles, the more energy efficient appliances produced and sold, the lower the cost per unit. It also increases the number of potential used appliances down the road that will be available in the resale market for people who can't afford new ones.

Even if prices don't drop enough to make them affordable for people who make less money, the fact people may have to repair appliances instead of junking them also saves energy. It takes power – after all – to fashion machines out of either steel, iron, aluminum or whatever national resource is needed.

It is time to end the bailout mentality that is raging full bore along the Potomac and address the underlying problems by getting back to economic basics.

One of those basics is the idea of personal responsibility. That, of course, is a foreign concept to your typical politician or career bureaucrat whose world revolves around whoever is in power.

Another basic is reasonable debt. There was a time when debt was reserved for big ticket items such as appliances, cars and houses. It wasn't to spread out the cost of a meal at Applebee's over seven years. It is ironic, in a way that most who are taking advantage of the \$8,000 housing credit and the Cash for Clunkers are doing so responsibly. The one that isn't is the federal government. One doesn't pile on debt when you can't afford it nor can pay for it.

However, when you're addicted to stimulus money as the magic cure all common sense and the long range outlook become superfluous. It is all about a quick high but like all uppers – economic and otherwise - you are going to crash unless you keep main-lining the stimulus cash.

America needs Uncle Sam to provide tough love and not be an enabler.

[Fresno Bee Earth Blog, Wed., Sept. 2, 2009:](#)

Summer smokeout in Southern California

By Mark Grossi

The ozone problems are easing a bit in Southern California, but it's still a smokey mess. It would be a good time for folks down there to vacation almost anywhere else.

Folks down there are breathing soot or PM2.5 levels several times the health standard.

On Monday, the PM-2.5 reading peaked at 200 micrograms per cubic meter of air. The latest federal health standard is 35, and a lot of people argue that the standard should be lowered.

All that smoke combines with the unhealthy ozone level to make a corrosive soup that Angelenos have been breathing for days.

The South Coast Air Basin certainly has reclaimed the dubious title of worst air in the nation this summer. No other region has nearly as many ozone violations, even though the South Coast total is lower than the region has been averaging in the past few years.