

Choking traffic, choking air Measure C debate centers on building more freeways and worsening pollution.

By Jim Davis, The Fresno Bee, November 3, 2002

Sit on Earnest Dean's porch for a minute and watch the trucks rumble through this southwest Fresno neighborhood.

On this day, many are carrying sugar beets headed for a Mendota factory. For 20 years, Dean has lived in this B Street home, listening to the trucks "all night long and all day, all night and all day."

But the noise likely will end soon. A mile from his home, Freeway 180 is being extended across Freeway 99, and that will divert much of the truck traffic from Dean's neighborhood.

It's one of the projects fueled by Measure C -- a half-cent sales tax for transportation that in its first 15 years has been used mainly to build Fresno's freeway system.

Tuesday, voters will be asked to extend Measure C for 30 years. In the community and on the streets, people see the need for the freeways they use every day, but others worry about sprawl and air pollution.

One of those freeway projects saves Kirby D. Molen 15 minutes each way on the drive from his foothills home in Tollhouse to downtown Fresno. And Molen doesn't have to navigate a maze of surface streets to get around town anymore.

"I'm not a big tax proponent, but I think it's one of the few examples where we can actually see the results in the community," Molen says. "You can go out and see what it's paid for in the past 15 years."

Kevin D. Hamilton, Community Medical Centers' asthma education program coordinator, supported Measure C and also believes the freeways are needed.

But he says he will vote against the extension because he says transportation tax money should do more for air quality in a county where one out of six children suffers from asthma.

"You cannot disconnect transportation from public health," Hamilton says. "There was a time when people could do that -- that time is gone."

If approved, the Measure C extension would raise an estimated \$2.8 billion over 30 years to build roads, such as expanding Freeway 41 to eight lanes or widening Millerton Road to a four-lane highway.

New in the extension: millions of dollars earmarked for transit, trails and bicycle paths and consolidating Fresno's two rail lines.

The proposal was crafted by a committee of business, government and special interests such as the League of Women Voters. Although adopted by the majority, the group fractured after it couldn't agree on how to split the tax money.

Ed Eames, the Americans with Disabilities advisory council representative on the committee, voted against it, but he struggled with his decision. The extension also guarantees dollars to help make communities compliant with federal disability laws.

But Eames says the proposal doesn't do enough for transit -- a huge concern, he says, for the disabled community -- and doesn't do enough to address the county's air problems.

"Kids are being kept off playgrounds because of the air," Eames says. "That's crazy."

Special-interest groups such as the Coalition for Community Trails -- which wants to build a 214-mile trail system in Fresno and Clovis -- and the Fresno Cycling Club quietly supported this proposal. The cycling club's Nick Paladino voted for it, but he says it does the minimum for adding bike lanes.

"It's still primarily a street and roads program -- it's still primarily set up to build more and bigger roads," he says.

Octavia Diener, who co-chaired the committee with Joe Levy, argues that the extension is far more balanced than in the past. She says it's needed to ease congestion as the county's population grows from 800,000 to an estimated 1,582,000 in 2037. Easing congestion, she says, will help improve air quality.

She also says it would be a key economic tool, creating thousands of jobs.

Levy says people don't think about what the original Measure C has done.

"Somebody told me that if you close [Freeway] 41 for three days, you would get everyone in the city to vote for this," says Levy, Gottschalks department store chairman. "I happen to concur."

Levy says he believes technology will improve in the next 15 years so much that air pollution will be a thing of the past.

Hamilton, the asthma program coordinator at Community, is skeptical: "We'll be living on the moon then, too, right?"

The technology is out there to build clean-burning vehicles, Hamilton says, but he questions whether there is legislative will to force the use of the technology on people. He points to the SUVs that dot the freeways now.

And the debate has spilled onto the lawns of homes throughout the community

On Ashlan Avenue in Tarpey Village, a sign opposing Measure C -- "Got Asthma? Got Smog? No on Measure C" -- stands just around the bend from a sign that promotes a road project paid for by those funds with the slogan "The Road Project Paid for by Measure C Funds."

Russell Webster, who has the anti-Measure C sign in his front yard, doesn't have strong feelings about politics. Someone asked to put the sign in his yard, and he agreed.

But he has strong feelings about the roads. Ever since Freeway 168 reached Ashlan Avenue, he says he has seen more and more cars and trucks speed past his home, headed to new homes built east of Fowler Avenue.

"There's very few here who ever do less than 35 [mph]," Webster says. And he worries that he will lose his front yard if Measure C funds are used to widen Ashlan.

Long-time professor Warren Kessler at California State University, Fresno, believes congestion has worsened on Shaw Avenue and Freeway 41 even though newly built Freeway 168 sits to the east of the campus.

Still, will the philosophy professor vote against Measure C? "I'm in a quandary about it," he says. "I'm inclined to vote for the measure because I don't want all the good uses of road construction to stop.

"But I can see the argument of people, including the League of Women Voters, that this particular plan doesn't give adequate attention to mass transit. I know the city and the whole county will be knee-deep in trouble if we don't."

In Huron, about 50 miles southwest of Fresno, the new version of Measure C promises to fix flooding problems along Highway 269, which is the main north-south route through the small community.

But Mayor Daniel Tamayo, who has lived nearly all his life in Huron, doubts the road work will be done. He says officials have broken every promise to fix 269 that he can remember. Even so, he supports Measure C.

"I know eventually it does filter down to Huron, and we are able to fund new construction projects and all that stuff that people are concerned about," Tamayo says.

The most tangible evidence of Measure C at work can be seen on either end of Freeway 180, in Earnest Dean's neighborhood in southwest Fresno and across town.

There, in east Fresno, Patti Tombs' home overlooks the dusty and noisy construction.

Tombs is concerned about pollution after the freeway opens. She has had problems breathing, and she worries that fumes from freeway traffic will aggravate her problems. She and her husband are thinking about selling their home of 30 years.

"It's going to be a real hard move," Tombs says. "All the neighbors here ... we all know each other."

Nearby, Anna Garcia's back yard abuts the freeway. She worries about the impending stream of noisy traffic.

Still, Garcia says she would continue paying a half-cent for the roads.

"It's convenient," Garcia says. "I just hop on the freeway, and it's seven minutes to work."

Cleaner dry cleaning

Proposed end to use of "perc" has air districts, businesses watching.

Fresno Bee, November 4, 2002

When you strip the plastic covering off your dry cleaning at home, that ether-like odor you smell is perchloroethylene or "perc," as it is commonly known. A clear, colorless solvent, perc has been the standard chemical used by dry cleaners for 50 years. Dirty clothes are dipped into vats of perc, which can lift the most stubborn stains from almost any fabric.

Unfortunately perc also causes cancer. Eleven years ago, state air regulators declared the chemical a toxic air contaminant and required dry cleaners to limit emissions and stop flushing perc-laced waste into sewers. Now regulators in the state's South Coast Air Quality Management District propose to phase out all perc use by 2019.

The South Coast district reports 850 tons of perc are released into the air in that region every year, and dry cleaners are responsible for 60% of those emissions. (In the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, about 325 dry cleaners use 37,000 gallons of perc every year.) Those who live near dry cleaners and breathe perc fumes face greater risk of cancer than those who live next to power plants or oil refineries.

Working in dry cleaning establishments poses the greatest risk. Workers regularly exposed to perc report headaches, dizziness, nose and throat irritation and coughing.

Recognizing that a vast number of dry cleaners are mom-and-pop operations, many owned by Korean immigrants, the South Coast district board has fashioned a sensible rule that softens the financial impacts on small businesses. Although dry cleaners in the region would be barred from purchasing perc machines after Jan. 1, 2003, the phase-in period for banning perc use entirely is 15 years, longer than the 12-year useful life of a new machine. So any dry cleaners who have recently purchased a machine would not lose their investment. Also, the district has identified environmentally safer alternatives, some of which are cheaper and use less energy.

The South Coast air board is set to vote on the new rules soon. Air districts and the dry cleaning industry are watching. That vote could change the way clothes are cleaned forever, in Los Angeles and beyond.

Fireplaces might go cold next year

By MELANIE TURNER, MODESTO BEE STAFF WRITER, November 1, 2002

This winter will be the last time valley air officials say "please" when they ask people to not light their fireplaces.

Mandatory no-burn nights will be part of a program set to start next winter. Air district officials hope to start educating people about the program now, so that those who want to invest in cleaner technology have time to do so.

The new program will replace the "Please Don't Light Tonight" request that San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials make when the air hangs heavy with soot.

The voluntary campaign, aimed at encouraging people not to light their fireplaces and wood stoves on bad air nights, enters its final season next week.

The valley air contains so many tiny particles that the region violates federal health standards. The particles can be associated with lung disease, cardiac disease and increased risk of cancer, according to air district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello.

Air officials propose a two-tiered system for next year. When the air quality is at its worst, fewer people would be allowed to light fires at home.

As many as 20 times a season, that could mean no-burn nights for people who own regular fireplaces and other burning devices that aren't Environmental Protection Agency-certified, Bello said.

There would be five to 10 no-burn nights a season that apply to almost everyone, except for people with gas fireplaces and people whose only heat source is a wood-burning fireplace or other noncertified device, officials said.

Enforcement, fines still up in air

The details of such a program -- how it would be enforced and how much people who ignore the rule might be fined -- are being hammered out and will go through extensive public review, Bello said.

"Obviously, someone with a gas insert would have no restrictions," she said. "That's why we are urging people who want to burn wood often to change to the cleaner certified devices to reduce the amount of their restrictions and keep more options open for themselves."

Troy Cooper, manager of Ultimate Spas and Stoves in Modesto, said prices for modern EPA-certified gas, pellet or wood stove inserts, as well as free-standing stoves, range from \$800 to \$3,000.

The district's proposal also would limit fireplaces or stoves to one per acre in new subdivisions.

Bill Zoslocki, board vice president of the Building Industry Association of Central California, said the rule shouldn't be a problem.

"Most new homes have direct-vent fireplaces," which only burn natural gas, he said. "Everybody's getting better air out of it," he added.

Wood seller sees contradiction

But Phil Lionudakis, who sells thousands of cords of dried firewood -- mostly almond -- every year, doesn't see the logic.

"Most of the firewood comes from the almond orchards. If you don't dry the wood, it's going to put out more smoke. It's ridiculous to think (ranchers) can burn it green in the field, and we can't heat our homes when it's dry," he said.

He said the 20 or so no-burn days would constitute about one-third of the days many of his customers burn fires in their homes.

The valley air district is modeling its program after communities that already have implemented similar programs. Reno has had a program in place since 1987.

Tracie Douglas, spokeswoman for air quality management with the Washoe District Health Department, said people there have come to realize if they cut back burning on voluntary no-burn days, the air quality never gets bad enough to trigger a ban.

"We have not had a burn ban in eight winters," she said.

She said early on, air officials checked for people burning on the wrong nights.

"They know now that we will be out there knocking on doors," she said.

She said warnings have been issued, although no one has been subjected to the \$250 fine.

Bee staff writer Jeff Jardine contributed to this report.

County continues efforts to curb air pollution

By Eiji Yamashita, Hanford Sentinel Reporter, November 3, 2002

HANFORD -- In its latest effort to meet the federal air quality standard, Kings County this week considered its best ideas to curb tiny airborne particle emissions and expressed an intent to carry them out.

Through different measures, some of which are already in place, the county wants to control particulate matter (PM-10) emissions from sources such as roadway dust in unincorporated county areas.

On Tuesday, the Kings County Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted a resolution committing to implement best available control measures.

With the San Joaquin Valley air basin deemed "serious" for the type of air pollution, regional and local agencies are being required to consider these measures culled from other similarly classified areas.

The Valley was given the worst possible non-attainment status for PM-10 in 1993. PM is a respiratory irritant blamed by many as a cause of growing asthma rates in the area.

Of nine measures considered, five were recommended in the resolution, which was adopted as recommended by the county public works department.

These measures include:

paving of drive approaches,

erosion cleanup,

street improvements,

paving off-street loading areas, and

maintenance of open lots.

The rest of the measures were excluded either because they are impractical or unreasonable for Kings County, said Kevin McAlister, public works chief engineer.

In spring, the board took similar actions regarding ground-level ozone, which Valley air officials say is a more dire problem facing the region than PM. Valley counties, including Kings, were probing local ozone control measures because the federal Environmental Protection Agency gave the region dirtier air status last December.

The EPA required the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to submit a status improvement plan by May, or it would lose federal highway funding.

But the district board in June decided to ask for the EPA's worst air quality designation of "extreme" non-attainment instead of sending the plan.

The district hopes to submit a formal request by next September, according to district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello.

Bello has said the district cannot show a plan that demonstrates its ability to meet the standard by 2005 as required under the current "severe" status because it has no authority over the major sources of the pollution -- mobile sources, such as cars and trucks.

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Opinion

Yes on Measure C

Fresno County's transportation future is at stake.

Measure C, the Fresno County transportation tax on Tuesday's ballot, has been the subject of much disinformation by critics. Voters who look at it closely will see that Measure C is a balanced proposal that is more than a freeway plan.

It also would fund alternative transportation projects, help pay for rail consolidation, help the city comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, improve bus service, build rural roads and fix potholes.

Measure C would succeed the current transportation tax that expires in 2007. Voters should support the renewal of Measure C on Tuesday.

The proposal to renew the transportation tax was drawn up by a 36-member steering committee in a yearlong process. While it's difficult to get universal agreement on a community's transportation needs, this plan was passed on a 31-5 vote of the committee. That speaks to the widespread support of the compromise measure that these patient citizens crafted.

Unfortunately, this transportation tax plan will need a two-thirds vote to pass, meaning that a minority of Fresno County voters can thwart the will of the majority.

Don't leave Fresno County's transportation future to others. Every supporter of good transportation planning should vote for Measure C on Tuesday.

Transportation questions raised

Voters to decide if half-cent sales tax should continue

Voters will decide Tuesday whether to continue Measure C, a half-cent sales tax to pay for transportation purposes. Originally passed in 1986, Measure C will expire in 2007 if not extended.

Supporters argue the measure will build new roads, repair old ones and benefit transit. Opponents argue the measure does not go far enough in fixing roads or cleaning the air.

Here are some of their views:

Q. Will Measure C add to my taxes? No. This would continue the existing sales tax at its current rate of 7.625% in Fresno County. (The city of Clovis is slightly higher.) If it fails, the sales tax would drop by a half percent starting in 2007.

Q. Don't we already pay for roads through the gas tax? Yes. Drivers pay an 18-cent-a-gallon excise tax for transportation purposes. And Proposition 42, passed last spring, sets aside the 6% sales tax on gas and diesel to pay for roads and transit.

The San Joaquin Valley Taxpayers Association opposes Measure C, arguing this is enough money to pay for the county's transportation needs. Supporters argue it is not. The state will work with the counties -- about 18 right now -- that bring their own money to the table. These supporters point to the freeway system that was planned since the 1950s, but never was a high priority for state dollars. The freeway system was built only after voters approved the first Measure C.

Q. Will the new version of Measure C continue to build freeways? The new version lists road projects for the first 10 years, and freeways, highways and expressways would only be widened. But the measure doesn't list what will be built in the last 20 years of the 30-year measure.

Supporters argue this is a needed flexibility, allowing policymakers to decide in future years the greatest needs. But opponents argue that this means the bulk of the funding isn't being approved by voters.

Q. Does the new Measure C do anything for transit? If passed, the new version would guarantee nearly \$12.1 million of added dollars every year for the county's three major bus systems. Fresno Area Express, the largest in the county, would get \$9.3 million a year. Clovis transit would get about \$1.8 million, and Fresno County Rural Transit would receive \$933,000. (Rural Transit, however, provides twice as many passenger rides as Clovis transit. In 2001, Rural Transit gave 448,902 rides while Clovis gave 121,145 rides.) Opponents of Measure C contend this is not enough new money to entice people to use transit or to expand the system for people who need to use it.

Q. What about trails and bike lanes? The new version puts about \$3.2 million a year to what's called "transportation choice programs." The first priority is to make communities compliant with American with Disabilities Act standards. After that, the money can be used to build trails and other projects. The new version doesn't have a pot of money to build bike lanes. Instead, it requires that new construction or reconstruction of old roads add bike lanes if feasible.

Q. Why are we voting on this now if the current version of Measure C doesn't expire until 2007? Supporters argue that by passing Measure C now, road planners can start on projects that are years in the future. But opponents argue there's plenty of time to come up with a new version by waiting another two years and getting a broader group of citizens involved in the planning.

Q. If passed, will it improve air quality? Again, that's up for debate. Supporters contend this measure will ease congestion, which will help air quality. They say consolidating Fresno's two railroads will stop hundreds of cars and trucks from idling while waiting for trains.

But opponents argue this version does not make enough air quality improvements. They say this version also could aggravate air quality by encouraging sprawl.

Opponents also say total vehicle mileage is rising twice as fast as the population increase with the current Measure C.