

Fresno Bee Editorial, December 26, 2002

The quality of leadership

The job of cleaning our air will test those in positions of power.

The struggle to clean up the Valley's filthy air is going to be a long and difficult one. How well our leaders -- elected and otherwise -- respond to that call will do much to determine just how long and difficult a task it is we have ahead of us.

The recent past suggests little reason for optimism. Most of our leaders have found it far too easy to dismiss the few voices that have been raised in warning against what we have been doing to the air we breathe. It has been too easy, especially for elected leaders, to play to the public's inertia -- give them what they want, and what they want is mostly to wallow in denial and not be bothered by inconvenient and often expensive initiatives.

No more. The new measure of Valley leaders, in both public and private sectors, will be how well they create solutions to this deadly problem, and how effectively they educate, persuade and energize the public to make those often painful choices -- how well, in short, they lead.

Here is one important place to start: A Measure C extension that meets the immediate needs of a polluted Valley and can also pass muster with voters. It won't be easy, as the failed effort of last November clearly showed.

But it must be done. The new Measure C extension -- which would keep in place the existing half-cent sales tax for transportation needs in Fresno County -- must address more fully the crying needs for mass transit and other alternatives to gasoline- and diesel-powered vehicles. It is incumbent on our elected officials, as well as leaders among business, civic and advocacy groups to come together effectively in this effort.

The failure of the extension on the ballot in November has led to some hurt feelings. Get over it, and get going -- now -- on a better measure. The sooner it is crafted, the sooner the effort to convince the voters to support it can begin. We had the luxury of one failure at the ballot box; the existing Measure C authority does not expire until 2007.

But we may only get one more chance before that expiration. We can't afford to fail. The Valley is always on the short end of the stick when it comes to funding from the state and federal governments. We're on our own for most of what we need here, and that's not likely to get better, with government budgets squeezed for the foreseeable future. We need a new Measure C, and we need the leadership it will take to see it through to passage.

In the meantime, there are other steps we can begin to take. Here's one:

Alternative fuel vehicles exist for nearly every task that government undertakes. Public agencies in the Valley -- city councils, county boards of supervisors, K-12 schools, special districts, colleges and universities -- should adopt right now a policy of replacing vehicles in their fleets with those alternative fuel models at every opportunity. That doesn't mean junking whole fleets all at once; just replace older models with cleaner vehicles as they wear out. Some major private fleet owners have already made great strides in this direction.

Eventually, local governments could work up to a regional transit system that took care of all the transit needs of Valley residents. It's a good start -- but only a start.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

Another in a series of Thursday editorials on the Valley's air quality.

Fresno Bee Community Column, December 26, 2002

Can 'leaders' lead us to pollution solutions?

By Ruth Rosborough-Larocca
Special correspondent with The Bee

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico -- My husband just called. He'd pulled The Bee off the Internet, with its feature stories written by Mark Grossi and teammates, and the lead editorial.

Al read some of it to me. All about air. Sky. Fresno sky. Or what's laughingly called Fresno's "air." That's like calling vodka "good spring water" -- except vodka has a kick and what we've been breathing for 18 years kicks us. Both can kill you, but with vodka you have a choice.

Fresno air? Lotsaluck. Have our "leaders" really seen that sky?

We moved to Fresno (1984) for the air. Clean town; clear air. I've written about the "clear, blue bowl of sky" -- one might have called it an experience of infinity.

Fresno water was the tastiest in the nation, but that's another story.

By August of 1986 the sky changed. Oh, we saw blue from time to diminishing time for the next few years through a sickening yellow-green haze ... until the haze became our sky and Valley residents started feeling -- not unwell (though some were unwell) -- so much as not "nice" anymore.

If you breathe soup, you feel soupy.

I'm sitting here in my Puerto Rican home, looking out our windows up into a blessed San Juan sky. Do local pols comment on this sky? No ... it's an act of God. Besides, they are trying to avoid not sky, but water. Stories about water I could tell you!

In theological terms, San Joaquin Valley sky is an act of God, too, and it's still there -- above the filth we've been trained to call "smog" -- a man-made phenomenon we regret has brought asthma to 16% of Valley children.

Late to the party

Our self-designated "leaders" are truly sorry.

Would it be rude to inquire where they and their promises have been over the past 20 to 30 years? Anyone who could read could predict what was coming.

Lacking the fortitude to challenge San Francisco civic or corporate power, have they been hoping that somehow "Citizens for Clean Air" would arise (as did the Sierra Club years before)? Solve the ever-increasing pollution these dear ol' pols have been ignoring to save their hides, to permanently defer the risk of offending potential corporate campaign donors?

We all know that's what it comes down to: protecting the ambitions of our "professional" political class. Clearing their paths to Sacramento -- or Washington, if the dice fall right.

We know who our few good leaders are; we must force ourselves to think about the rest of the political class whether we want to or not.

Let's challenge them into action or out of office. Fresnoans are noted for common sense. Let's confront the trough-feeders, Republican and Democrat alike. Now. Force them to make Valley air their prime cause. Let our Chamber of Commerce demand the folks in Sacramento come to the Valley for a couple of weeks -- spending most of their time outdoors, visiting schools and playgrounds, talking to teachers and school nurses. Breathing. Visiting our hospitals where incapacitated children and their incapacitated grandparents breathe oxygen through plastic tubes that have become parts of their faces.

Let Sacramento incumbents tell talk-show hosts, "It's awful, but what can we do?"

Insist they go to farms, ask serious questions about the serious effects this filthy air has on livestock and crops alike.

Insist they do something now before these dead and dying air particles kill off those who can't leave.

The defiling of our skies has become overwhelming because the two-party system has not served the people of the Valley. Let us show our displeasure in imaginative ways! Actively oppose any political incumbent who hasn't had the intestinal ... the guts ... to stand up and be counted on this issue. Vote Green!

Tropical respite

Here in the bountiful air of Puerto Rico, I've stopped coughing. "Allergies" are gone. I can breathe again. We won't live here forever. When we leave San Juan, who would advise us to return to our beloved Fresno?

Encircling mountains to the south, east, west no longer punctuate the blue bowl of heaven; our mountains are the rim of the bowl of hell, receptacles for the "smog" that is killing the Valley. For decade upon decade prevailing northwest winds have been sweeping San Francisco air waste into Valley skies.

Who will demand solution, dissolution? Demand elected officials who will stand up and say, "Enough!"