

Air district adds staff for stepped-up scrutiny

By MATT WEISER, Bakersfield Californian, December 28, 2002

Californian staff writer

Six new staffers will be joining the San Joaquin Valley's battle against air pollution in the wake of the region's federal classification as a "severe" smog zone.

The new jobs were approved at the Dec. 19 board meeting of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, along with an additional \$134,700 to cover the salaries and equipment needs for the remainder of the current budget year. The board agreed to hire one senior air quality engineer, one senior air quality specialist, and four air quality engineers. The full annual salary cost for the six jobs in future years is estimated at \$432,000.

Sayed Sadredin, director of permit services for the air district, said he hopes to have the new employees hired by April 1, 2003. They are needed because the region failed to meet federal standards for smog reduction and was reclassified on Dec. 10, 2001, from "serious" to "severe nonattainment" under federal rules.

The "severe" status will subject 150 existing valley businesses to additional regulatory scrutiny, requiring new air district employees to process and analyze the new permits they must submit and hold public hearings on each.

These 150 businesses will now be considered "major sources" of pollution, and it is estimated they involve 1,500 permits that must be processed under the "severe" status. In general, each permit represents a single polluting device at each business, such as a large furnace or pump that produces smog-forming emissions.

Affected businesses are generally medium to large industrial facilities that the air district previously regulated to a lesser degree.

Sadredin said it's unlikely these existing businesses will be required to install new pollution controls during the process. This would only happen, he said, if the process reveals a business is already out of compliance. This could result in enforcement action and orders to modify a polluting facility.

"We don't expect very much of that," he said. "It's essentially an administrative process they have to go through. They have to describe their operation to us, and their emissions and compliance status with respect to applicable regulations."

The six new hires will increase the air district's total payroll from 233 to 239 positions. All the new employees will be based at the air district's main offices in Fresno where a "permitting factory" is being set up to process the new permits.

"We think doing it centrally will increase efficiency," Sadredin said.

The air district faces a deadline to process the permits, so filling the jobs quickly is important, he said. The 30-month deadline is expected to begin ticking in February 2003.

Fees generated by the new permits are expected to cover the cost of the new employees.

After the permits are processed, the new workers will stay on board to process permit renewals for both existing and new "major source" polluters. Federal law requires each of these permits to be renewed every five years.

One Step for Monorail

Money will fund study to determine whether the transit system is possible in Fresno.

By Russell Clemings, The Fresno Bee, December 28, 2002

It's an audacious idea, one of those things that gives optimists pause and makes skeptics roll their eyes.

A monorail.

In Fresno.

Imagine trains from Tomorrowland speeding above Blackstone Avenue and other busy arteries at 50 mph while motorists fight their way through rush-hour traffic.

Bold, it clearly is. But is it realistic?

A local committee led by a cookie mogul and a landscape architect hopes to have an answer by spring.

The Fresno Area Sky Train committee has raised \$15,000 and soon will receive an additional \$26,000 in federal funding, routed through Caltrans, for a feasibility study that will gauge the market for such an advanced transit system and estimate its construction and operating costs.

Getting to this point has taken the committee most of a decade. In fact, it took two years for its members to pull together the money for the feasibility study, even after they announced it at a press conference in December 2000.

Now, however, the committee thinks things are changing, said one member, landscape architect Paul Saito.

"It's started to pick up steam now that we've gotten Caltrans to agree to participate," Saito said.

Saito and committee chairman Deryl Bear, owner of Hungry Bear Cookies, said they expect their idea to gather even more momentum if their study, to be conducted by the civil and environmental engineering department at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, concludes that it is feasible.

"If that study shows we're on the radar screen, then it opens up a lot of doors," Bear said.

The committee envisions a monorail system spanning 34 miles, with a series of east-west feeder routes connecting to the main north-south Blackstone Avenue route, and electric shuttles to ferry passengers from their homes to the nearest station. It estimates the system's cost at \$1.5 billion.

By any measure, that is a lot of money. It's more than half of what the Measure C extension on November's election ballot would have raised over 30 years, if it had won the required two-thirds approval, which it didn't.

But backers point to savings that would result from building an advanced transit system -- everything from the avoided cost of having a second, third or fourth car to the reduced need for new streets and utilities in sprawling suburbs.

"We believe we can show that what we call 'urban sprawl overhead' costs every Fresno family \$10,000 a year," Bear said.

The committee chose to focus its efforts on a monorail rather than a traditional light-rail system because it believes a monorail could be wedged into highly developed areas where ground-based trains might not be possible.

Blackstone Avenue, Shaw Avenue and other heavily traveled streets have many of the destinations that transit users will want to reach, including shopping centers and places of employment. But those streets are already congested with cars, trucks and buses. Finding space on the ground for a set of tracks and light-rail stations would be impossible, the committee argues.

A monorail, in contrast, would need only enough ground space for its supporting pillars. Stations could be incorporated into buildings; quiet, electric-powered trains could deposit passengers inside, the committee said.

Downtown, the system could link with the state's proposed high-speed rail network. To the east, it could have stops at Fresno Yosemite International Airport and California State University, Fresno.

Bear even envisions new mid-rise and high-rise office and housing developments springing up in the monorail corridors, enabling future Fresnoans to go from home to work to shopping without ever entering a street.

"If this thing works," he said, "what it will do for Fresno is far more than anyone is thinking."

Caltrans planner Jeffrey Spencer, whose office has committed federal funds to the feasibility study, is not making predictions yet. He describes the funding pledge as providing support for "an exploration" of the monorail committee's idea.

But he said the state is keenly interested in finding new ways to increase transit ridership and thereby cut congestion on surface streets and highways. And if there are some people in Fresno who think that a monorail is the answer, he reasons, then why say no?

"There's no sense in shutting down any opportunities," Spencer said.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, December 29, 2002](#)

OPINION: Area Report Card For 2002

We delved into 2002 with hope and optimism. In fact, we almost wrote an editorial anticipating an excellent year for Modesto, Stanislaus County and the Northern San Joaquin Valley.

Almost.

But as soon as the year started, news and views gave us pause. That's not to say good things didn't happen in 2002; from the renovation of Modesto's most notorious slum to continued downtown revitalization, they did.

Yet in many ways, it was a year of stagnancy, confined by the past. For reasons that included poor decisions by former city councils and long-standing feuds among public officials, local policy-makers too often were tugged backward.

Particularly in Modesto, residents and their elected leaders spent the year looking back because for too long decision-makers hadn't looked ahead. Examples of muffed, short-sighted policy have included underbidding developers in Village I by tens of millions of dollars, and failing to plan for and provide a Pelandale Expressway that even remotely lives up to its name.

Here is our report card on local policy and leadership in 2002 -- from good to bad to ugly. While not all-inclusive, it hits the highlights and lowlights.

The good:

Teamwork between the public and private sectors achieved what neither could have done alone: renovate Prescott Estates, once the most crime-plagued, disreputable neighborhood in Modesto.

The City Council adopted common-sense disclosure rules that oblige people bringing projects before the council to reveal their identities and interests.

The Gallo Arts Center, a long-awaited entertainment venue in downtown Modesto, has pulled to within \$1 million of its construction fund-raising goal.

Downtown Modesto has continued to grow and flourish.

Area leaders and residents have begun a serious and vital public debate about growth, in part prodded by Modesto City Councilmen Denny Jackman and Bruce Frohman.

Because of a bill steered through the Legislature by former Assemblyman (now Congressman-elect) Dennis Cardoza, the Bay Area finally will obey the stringent vehicle-emission rules that apply to most of California. Because Bay Area pollutants ride wind patterns into the valley, it will be a step toward cleaning the filthy air here.

Voters rejected the disgraced Gary Condit and elected Cardoza to succeed him.

Community beautification efforts, sparked more than two years ago by Modesto businessman Pete Bakker, have retained and regained momentum.

Modesto has improved traffic flows on its crammed roads by resynchronizing stoplights.

Projects that promise far-reaching economic and educational benefits for the region -- including the University of California at Merced and the megaresort Diablo Grande -- have continued to move forward. Plans for a Kaiser hospital in Modesto also were announced this year.

Proposals for two business parks, near Interstate 5 in Patterson and at the former FMC site in Modesto, also have been advancing, albeit slowly.

The bad:

Leaders in the public and private sectors have made little tangible progress in bringing high-wage jobs to the valley, which remains shamed by double-digit rates of unemployment and poverty.

The Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors planned to churn a profit by importing mountains of out-of-county trash to the West Side landfill on Fink Road, but dumped the scheme after a public outcry.

A three-month standoff between musicians and the orchestra board of directors nearly destroyed the Modesto Symphony, a linchpin of Modesto-area culture. The music resumed this month when the two sides compromised.

Old technology has continued to hobble much of the Northern San Joaquin Valley. For example, cable and DSL Internet connections -- a staple of Bay Area homes and businesses -- remain unavailable in much of the valley.

In elections for the state Legislature and Congress, egregiously gerrymandered districts -- which stacked voter registration in favor of one major party or the other -- eroded voter choice in this year's elections.

The ugly:

Modesto policy-makers face a massive deficit -- projected at tens of millions of dollars -- in Village I, the megadevelopment in northeast Modesto. Previous City Councils, under pressure from builders, for years kept development fees far too low.

State officials fined Mid-Valley Engineering -- a Modesto land-use firm that helped lay the plans for Village I -- \$185,400 for laundering campaign money 112 times from 1997-99. Such conduct is widespread and long-standing in Modesto, according to records from the Fair Political Practices Commission and The Bee's investigative reports.

In Stanislaus County, the Board of Supervisors and nine city councils have done little to address a staggering road repair backlog. Unless that changes, the county's collective annual street deficit will swell from \$35 million to \$175.2 million in five years, according to Oakland-based Nichols Consulting Engineers.

Regionwide, elected officials have taken few steps to help clean the valley's toxic air, which degrades residents' health and endangers some people's lives. Cardoza's bill will help, but pollution from the Bay Area is but a slice of the problem. In fact, valley air is so filthy that the region soon could face severe federal sanctions.

The Modesto City Council has remained plagued by dysfunction, petty infighting and generally poor leadership from the mayor, who is consumed by personal debts and feuds.

City and county officials, most notably Mayor Carmen Sabatino, Supervisor Ray Simon and County Counsel Mick Krausnick, also bickered for much of the year, perpetuating long-running squabbles.

As 2002 winds down and we review the year's successes and failures, it also bears noting how quickly the valley is changing, growing and evolving.

As the number of new stores, restaurants and rooftops shows, we are deep into the transition from rural town to urban center. It's up to everyone to recognize that, and to grow, and grow up, along with the city.

Next year, we hope to see a more future-focused agenda, starting with five central and interrelated issues: growth; job creation; transportation; **air pollution**; and better teamwork, cooperation and leadership. Meanwhile, we bid goodbye to 2002 and wish a Happy New Year to all.

[Letters to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star:](#)

[December 28, 2002](#)

Shredding a good alternative

Editor: Your recent editorial entitled "Shredding farm waste preferable" in the Dec. 13 edition of the Merced Sun-Star was appreciated because it provided a thoughtful and, most important to me, an understandable approach to reducing air pollution in the Central Valley. I applaud your recognition of Mr. Bob Weaver from Atwater for his willingness to shred clippings from his orchards into mulch — as an alternative to burning them — which is then composted in time for the next harvest. If I understand the logic of your editorial correctly, this non-polluting approach would allow farmers to get rid of a huge amount of ag waste without hurting the environment, and also replenish the soil for future harvests.

You provided an easy to follow example of how recycling can benefit everyone. Of course a key factor to this process being implemented on a grand enough scale to make difference in our air quality would be making the process cost effective for farmers. How can this be achieved? Starting with our recently elected state Sen. Jeff Denham and Assemblywoman Barbara Matthews, as you mentioned, would be important decisionmakers to contact and to voice our concerns.

I understand that agricultural burning is just part of the problem concerning our air quality. We all must be mindful of our responsibility to be part of the solution. Anytime we drive our automobiles, care for our yards with gasoline-driven lawnmowers, or use our woodburning fireplaces, we must do so responsibly. More articles on how we can act responsibly to improve our environment would be welcomed. Thank you for publishing your editorial.

Robert Storm

Merced

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[December 27, 2002](#)

Give fireplaces the blame?

Editor: What do fireplace bans and ER closures have in common? How are they related to traffic gridlock and overcrowded schools?

Skillfully sidestepping the most powerful underlying cause for poor air quality, the EPA avoided being demonized as xenophobic by naming fireplace emissions as the varmint in the clean air henhouse.

California's immigration-driven population increase of 4 million in the last decade has all of our social, physical, cultural, and economic infrastructures reeling. Ten fewer ER's today than three years ago; With 2 million of our 6 million students in trailers, we must build at least 16 new classrooms, seven days a week for the next five years, just to stay even with a student population that just keeps on growing and growing; Even with the billions to "fix" the worst gridlock points, pollution-spewing drive-times will increase.

Since fireplaces have been identified as the culprit for poor air quality, and not wishing to be called a xenophobe, I suggest that we name fireplaces the cause for our infrastructure meltdown and get it over with.

Or you could get up from in front of your cozy fire and call the White House comment line at 202-456-1111 and tell them how you feel about immigration. At present rates of immigration, the U.S. is heading for a population of 400 million in the next 50 years. As we cope with that increase, we will kiss goodbye to far more precious quality of life icons than a cozy fire.

Barb Vickroy

Escondido

Letter to the Editor Bakersfield Californian:

December 28, 2002

Fireplace rule sensible

Having lived in Bakersfield for 17 years, I thought I had seen just about everything, but some folks still manage to surprise me.

Almost everyone will tell you they want better air quality. But try to get a few people with fireplaces to actually do something about it themselves and what happens? They quickly complain at being regulated and, in the same sentence, point the finger at the other guy, in this case under regulated industry and farms.

I witnessed almost identical behavior from farm and industry lobbyists last year in a public air quality meeting. They complained about regulation and quickly blamed other polluters for our poor air quality.

Wake up, people! Our filthy air is not someone else's problem. It is our problem and will not get solved by any of us sitting around doing nothing and pointing the finger at the other guy. That course of action only sacrifices the health of future generations on the altar of our own selfish hypocrisy.

Do something constructive about our air quality yourself. Only then do you have the moral right to complain about those who aren't. Only then is real change possible.

Finally, those who think environmental regulation is communist should visit a former communist country and see the ecological devastation there. I have done so and I will never forget it. The communists, being godless, had no care for anything in God's creation. Is that what you want for Kern County?

JOHN LOTZE, Bakersfield

December 27, 2002

Fireplace ban nonsensical

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is proposing to limit, by up to 20 days per winter, your use of your fireplace in your home in an attempt to reduce PM10 levels in the air.

Four days of testing done six years apart with the tester attributing 15-20 percent of PM10 levels to fireplaces is the scientific data they are relying on to place these restrictions.

Isn't it ironic that the purpose of attempting to reduce pollution in the valley is to maintain an estimated \$2 billion in federal funding to build more roads so more cars can travel through the valley? Cars are a large contributor of PM10 levels.

Can you expect a visit by the fireplace police or possibly a system of neighbors turning in each other? Who shall determine if the smoke coming out of your chimney is from a certified stove, a wax log, dry wood, gas stove or possibly just rising heat on a cold night?

Shouldn't the solution be to start with the largest generator of PM10 emission? Or take a portion of the \$2 billion of federal money and create a program to rebate consumers for updating to EPA-certified wood-burning devices and funding the development of some type of catalytic converter for your chimneys?

Or making sure wood sellers are selling properly seasoned wood.

Please call the San Joaquin Air Pollution Control District and voice your opinion.

Kurt Kautz, Lodi

Clean combustion needed

Within the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's jurisdiction are facilities that burn agricultural wood and urban wood as boiler fuel. The urban source is from landfill diversion and privately owned collection sites. This wood comes from all over the state for combustion.

The agricultural community within the district has no choice but to burn their wood because the combustion facilities are using mostly urban wood for fuel. That leaves thousands of tons of agricultural wood to be burned in the open fields. The open-field method of burning emits large amounts of PM10 and other smog-producing gasses.

If there are hundreds of tons of urban wood coming into the valley daily from outside the SJVAPCD to be combusted, how many tons of pollution are creating PM10 and other smog gasses are spewed into the valley's air from all the heavy truck traffic?

Contained within the SJVAPCD's jurisdiction is an ample source of agricultural wood available to fuel the combustion facilities boilers without importing urban wood from outside of the district.

The solution to the problem with PM10 and other smog gasses is to require combustion facilities in the district to use "in-district" fuel sources. The truck traffic is reduced substantially from inbound deliveries to the combustors from outside the district and thousands of tons of agricultural wood will then be diverted from open-field burning to clean combustion at the facilities.

LYLE LEGAN JR., Bakersfield

[Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee, December 30, 2002:](#)

Cut the city's garbage truck runs to save air, money

By Jerry McCracken
Fresno

Regarding the problem of dirty air in our Valley: I feel the sanitation department of the city of Fresno contributes unnecessarily to our problem.

City garbage trucks make two round trips a day, six days a week to the dump, located approximately 20 miles away. This comes to at least 480 unnecessary miles a week for every garbage truck in the city's fleet.

If there were a transfer station located in or near the city limits, most of these trips could be eliminated. This would not only save our air and eliminate unnecessary wear and tear on the trucks, it would make the department more efficient, as these trucks also spend at least two hours a day going to and from this remote dump.

A better result

By Wilfred Laemmlen
Sanger

The quality of our air, as well as the quality of our lives, is related to the planning of city and county growth.

Rather than urban sprawl and highway strip-building, we should work to create planned communities with planned population sizes.

Centers of living as well as centers of industries would be connected by various modes of transit. Agriculture, parks, rivers and recreational areas become our green spaces. Each city develops a central transit hub within reasonable distances of homes and businesses. Homes would be multilevel with basements.

Rather than increasing the periphery of cities like Fresno and Clovis we would work to provide the infrastructure to plan the growth of other communities throughout the Valley.

Tax money for the transport of people, goods and services would be spent to enhance our quality of life, minimizing the need to own that second or third vehicle. The result would be less congestion, more quality time at home, bicycle and walks with family, a better quality of air and a better environment.

Won't happen soon

By Fred Clark
Fresno

As with most other problems we face, our leaders are looking for painless solutions, to pass the buck to another agency or lay the most sacrifice on those with the fewest resources.

Clean air is our latest local crisis and it is not going away by banning wood-burning and power lawn and garden equipment.

There is no secret to clean air. Our leaders need to put a permanent moratorium on urban sprawl and ban or aggressively tax all passenger vehicles that exceed four cylinders. Establish tolls for single-passenger vehicles entering freeways away from the city core.

This will not be happening anytime soon. As long as our public officials accept bribes, er, contributions, from builders, developers and their bagmen, what is right for the public good will not be realized. Mass transit, greenbelts and bike lanes offer no profit, thus are not a viable option for the building industry, who seem to control local politicians.

Our leaders will continue to fund studies, establish blue-ribbon commissions and, with much fanfare, institute a few meaningless regulations.

It's not all bad: Think of all of the profits the pharmaceutical companies can rack up selling asthma medications. Business as usual.

Get the word out

By David Boos
Fresno

Collecting accurate data concerning the air quality and making this data available to all Valley residents is essential before we can proceed with a plan to reduce air pollution.

I suggest the following:

Publish comparative data on air quality, and also preceding year data, just as many newspapers presently do for rainfall and temperature information.

Implement a moratorium on business "drive-through stations," close down this convenience at existing businesses from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. to immediately and eventually ban their use permanently.

Local delivery truck drivers must turn off their engines while making deliveries.

Ban the use of gas- and electric-powered dust blowers used by gardeners and home owners.

The Nov. 12, 2001 edition of The Business Journal printed a pie chart showing the distribution of air pollution for the San Joaquin Valley. Here are the polluters ranked in descending order; motor vehicles 57%; off-road vehicles, 20%; industrial sources, 11%; outdoor burning, 9%; and fireplaces and wood stoves, 3%. Let's direct dialogue and action to areas of concern that may be more challenging, and not take the easy route and pick on citizens who are not connected to special interest groups.

Move to fuel cells

By Michael Rose
Hanford

The air in the Valley is very poor. We all know that.

What is the answer to the problem? It will take several solutions to clean up the air.

I don't have all the answers, but one solution came to me in the form of a college research paper. While taking biology, I was assigned a research project. I went into this project with the idea that current technology is the best we have. I came out the other end of the project changed.

I learned that there is a way to power our homes, cars and even city buses with no harm to the air we breathe. Hydrogen fuel cells have powered the space shuttle for years. They are a proven technology and produce only water as a "waste" byproduct. However, I also learned that the major oil companies are buying up the small companies that produce fuel cells and suppressing the technology. They have been putting out misinformation and working hard to keep us addicted to gasoline. They stand to lose so much if this technology came out.

We would gain much in the way of clean air and pure water. Think about it, instead of smog you have a stream of water on the side of the road. Cost to fill up a tank? It is estimated that it would cost about 10-25 cents a gallon to fill up with a renewable source of energy.

There is a downside. In the event of a crash, hydrogen can be very explosive. However, gasoline can also be very explosive.

There are some technological bugs that need to be ironed out, but I am convinced that this is the best way to clean our air, help our water supply and end our dependence on oil. Doubt what I say? Do the research and your eyes will be opened.

Cross-purposes

By Gayla Shorey
Fresno

It appears that the city of Fresno needs to get on the bandwagon when it comes to curbing the smog problem.

I have just finished reading the everyday solutions listed on the back of the "Last Gasp" special report. One is to "Seal all paints and solvents in the garage. Escaping fumes contribute to air pollution."

The next day, I received my "Operation Clean Up" flyer listing the dates and guidelines for participation. Under "Do's," they list, "Air-dry paint and dispose of it in your regular garbage." Hmmm ... seems to me the city ought to review its policies.

Time for solar

By Franz Weinschenk
Fresno

Thumbs up to The Bee for a terrific job of journalism on the "Last Gasp" supplement.

Cleaning up our Valley's foul air should be everybody's top priority. Here are a few suggestions:

Wouldn't it be great if we could get all public buildings (city, county, state and federal -- including schools) to convert to solar? Sure, the initial investment would be substantial, but along with

significantly reducing the amount of power made from smog-producing fossil-fuel, such a conversion would save taxpayers a huge bundle in years to come.

This one is courtesy of my neighbor: Discontinue the use of noisy leaf blowers. They mostly blow debris from one side of the street to the other, leaving the bulk of the dust suspended in the air for all of us to breathe. Whatever happened to rakes and brooms?

How about asking those hippy-dippy TV weathermen and women to quit being so cavalier about our unhealthy (and getting worse) air? We've all heard them: "That's right, folks, tomorrow is going to be another 'Spare The Air Day,' yuk, yuk ... So just leave the old SUV in the garage and ride your bike to work (not behind a diesel truck of course, ha, ha). And no mowin' the lawn or bar-be-cuein' either, right? As for you oldies -- well, just stay indoors and quit breathin', ha, ha ... Just kiddin', grandpa ... just kiddin'!"

'We can't wait'

By Cal Crane, President and Charles Sant' Agata, Executive Director, American Lung Association of Central California

The American Lung Association of Central California congratulates The Bee and its Dec. 15 "Last Gasp" special report staff for an outstanding presentation of the air pollution and lung disease challenge facing the San Joaquin Valley.

The "Last Gasp" 24-page report is the most in-depth news report of the Valley's air pollution crisis to date, and is appreciated.

The American Lung Association hopes The Bee's efforts will end the complacency of our citizens toward air pollution and lung disease. The people of this Valley must redirect their efforts to being a part of the solution to clean our air and improve the lung health of all our citizens.

The burning of wood, gasoline and diesel fuel are major causes of air pollution, and all are widely used in our Valley. We have a serious threat to our health and livelihood on our hands. Each of us in this Valley must do our part to clean our air. We can't wait until tomorrow -- or expect someone else to do it. We are in this Valley together. The deaths and human suffering from lung disease caused by air pollution cannot be allowed to continue or grow.

In the coming months, the leaders of this Valley will come together to develop solutions. Our hope is that everyone will choose to do his or her part.

'Black, stinky smoke'

By Evelyn Crews
Porterville

Every time I have my car smogged, I laugh at the ridiculous futility of that gesture.

While I am waiting through the process, semi-trucks and buses rumble past spewing fumes and black, stinky smoke so thick it is nauseating. I'm sure any one of those vehicles causes more pollution in a couple days than my well-maintained vehicle creates in an entire year.

If our government is serious about diminishing air pollutants, enforce emission standards for trucks, buses and any other vehicles using diesel fuel. Aside from the visible black smoke they emit, the stink they put into the air is intolerable.

I'm sure there is a lobby group somewhere claiming it would be too expensive to equip such vehicles with smog controls. Possibly true, but let's decide the priorities. Are we preserving profits for trucking companies, or preserving breathable air for the citizens of our world? Once that point is decided, the course of action will be obvious.

'Rare view'

By Jason Paukovits
Fresno

Did you notice the difference in Fresno recently? Long-time residents may have forgotten the magnificent view of the Sierra Nevada that can be seen from anywhere in the city.

Those new to the Valley probably have never seen them. For too many months of the year, the haze of dust and air pollution obscures our view.

The Bee did a tremendous job summarizing the challenges that our region faces with regard to air pollution in its special report "Last Gasp" Dec. 15. I hope that residents do not continue to ignore the issue and go on with life as if the problem does not exist. Perhaps the most important point made was that we all have to do our part -- it is everyone's problem. If people are not willing to make even minor changes, we will not see any progress. I moved from the Northeast, where it often reaches single-digit temperatures, to be closer to family. I absolutely love fires in the winter, but will pass on using the fireplace in my home this year to help a little bit.

Fresno does not need another stigma attached to its reputation, which is likely if we continue on the road to the worst air quality in the country. Let's work as a community to solve the problem, stop placing blame on someone (anyone) else and take pride in our region. Maybe this rare view of the mountains will become commonplace, something we can appreciate all year.

Do what must be done

By David Hart
Clovis

I hope everyone got a chance to glance to the east on Dec. 18.

I was utterly stunned by the sight. I stayed at the stop sign at the end of my street for a few moments.

It was the day after the big thunderstorm we had, and I could see the snow-capped Sierra Nevada. Later, driving south on Blackstone Avenue, just passing McKinley Avenue, I could actually see the tower in the Tower District.

These two sights really made me think about the horrible smog situation in the Valley. I am only 20 years old, and I never cared either way about this problem before, but that day I promised to do my part.

If banning fireplace burning, tighter emission controls or even driving every other day is a sacrifice I have to make for clean air, then so be it. Our air is no longer healthy and clean, and our Valley is no longer beautiful.

'Acrid fumes'

By Werner J. Lipton
Fresno

Residents of the Valley have the right to be able to step outside their homes without being assaulted by smoke from fireplaces wafting over neighborhoods on top of our generally polluted air ("Last Gasp" special report).

Many times I have had to retreat inside because the acrid fumes irritated my nose, my throat and, therefore, my mood.

It is high time to ban any and all burning of wood in fireplaces that do not meet the strictest standards regarding emission of particulates and to conscientiously enforce the prohibition.

That such a ban would discriminate against the poor, as claimed by some in Bee stories and letters, is a red herring: Dwellings where poor people live, whether houses or apartments, rarely have fireplaces.

The evidence that wood smoke is harmful is overwhelming, as clearly indicated during the recent Fresno colloquium sponsored by the University of California Medical Education Program: "Air pollution. Is it killing you?" No question about it, components of fireplace smoke are toxic.

Fireplace use must be curbed, not just because the Environmental Protection Agency demands it, but because our health -- yours, mine and that of our children and grandchildren -- is at stake. The time for pussy-footing around the problem is long past. Rules must be made and then enforced for those unwilling to voluntarily abide by them.

Must make changes

By Steve C. Moe
Clovis

The poor air quality in this area must be addressed.

As a teacher, I have noticed that the percentage of my students suffering from asthma has been on the increase for many years. In my current class, one of every four students uses an inhaler on a regular basis.

My suggestions:

Form car pools with co-workers. I save hundreds of dollars a year on gas costs alone. This also reduces wear and tear on vehicles and cuts down on the number of vehicles on the road, so traffic flow improves. It also allows social interaction.

Demand that automakers increase the fuel efficiency on all vehicles.

Demand that emission standards on diesel engines be implemented.

Stop the urban sprawl which developers have promoted in Fresno and Clovis. Create a green belt around our city limits and just say "no" to development outside the belt.

Create bike lanes and walking paths to allow commuters other travel options when weather permits.

Create a light-rail system to carry commuters between major locations within our sphere of influence.

Eliminate all ag burn days. The majority of ag waste can be used to produce electricity in biomass power production plants.

Demand accountability from our elected officials. If they are unwilling to vote for legislation to clean up our environment, get rid of them in the next election.

Implementing these suggestions will require us to make changes in our lifestyles. If we want to make our planet a better place for future generations we must act now.

'Obvious solution'

By Donna Barnes
Fresno

Many households use fireplaces and wood-burning stoves solely for heating their homes and not for ambience.

I am sure most people would gladly cut back on using these devices if the power company would cut back on its rates.

This seems like a pretty obvious solution to the pollution problem to me.

'Harmful effects'

By Don H. Gaede, M.D.
Fresno

What can we do about air pollution? We need to get people to realize that our Valley is like a very big room with the doors and windows shut.

Whatever we put into our air, we will have to breathe. We inhale what we expel.

I am going to try to persuade my patients that air pollution is probably hurting their health, and that we all need to become part of the solution. Doctors may be able to prevent heart attacks by prescribing cholesterol medicine, and help asthma by giving asthma inhalers, but we can't do anything to stop the harmful effects of ozone and microparticles on the body.

This year I traded in my Dodge Grand Caravan for a hybrid Toyota Prius and installed a gas insert into my fireplace. The car trade was not actually a sacrifice, since the Prius has such a quiet smooth ride, and the fireplace is a lot easier to manage without messing with all that wood.

It's obvious to me that taking steps now to reduce air pollution will be a lot easier and more enjoyable than having to live with the consequences of doing nothing.

'Eliminated completely'

By Shirley Blum
Fresno

I have asked my neighbors for several years to substitute their wood-burning fireplaces with gas inserts that are much more efficient for heating.

Energy costs have been reduced, and I see a transition taking place. Home builders are making that come true also.

I feel the City Council and county Board of Supervisors should be more proactive to influence this change. A few days a year is not the answer. Fireplace burning should be eliminated completely in this polluted Valley.

My other suggestion would be to eliminate leaf blowers. The noise and pollution infect homeowners and the environment.

Keep politics out

By Frank Saburit
Madera

The solution to our dirty air is simple, provided we keep partisan politics from clouding the issue.

This includes environmental politics.

The obvious problem is automobiles and commercial trucks. Valley traffic has tripled in the last 15 years, and a great deal of that is commercial trucks. If more products were shipped by rail, we

would cut a great deal of smog out of the Valley while cutting costs on freeway maintenance. I don't want commercial trucking to go away, but there must be a responsible balance.

Cars today are clean. On unhealthy days, the exhaust from a modern automobile is cleaner than what we breathe. The key is to get the 5% of automobiles that are causing 75% of the pollution off the road. These are improperly maintained vehicles. If you can't afford to maintain your automobile, don't drive. Driving is a privilege, not a right.

Then comes a more comprehensive public transportation system. Most people drive because it is the most direct way to get from point "A" to point "B." If those who struggle to make ends meet need to get to work, and it takes 20 minutes to drive as opposed to changing buses two or three times and taking an hour, they are going to drive whether the car is maintained or not.

Politicians are eager to punish people who drive SUVs because that is where the money is. When it comes to politics, it's about money. Politicians would rather tax than effectively deal with the problem at hand.

Bring back roadside inspections and impound the "gross polluters." A more comprehensive public transit system that people will use, and shipping more products by rail are the answers. Don't punish the achievers and the farmers who put food on our tables.

Agriculture's role

By Stephen L. Guertin
Clovis

I realize I'm treading on hallowed ground in the following suggestions, but I don't feel I'm out of line.

Eliminate or significantly reduce ag-burning days to once or twice a year. I know ag is big business and a powerful lobby in our Valley, but it should be held to task also. There are chippers and shredders that can handle logs up to diameters of 6 inches to 8 inches. Shredding the brush to mulch and spreading it over the fields seems to be an excellent recycling method that would be much favored over burning.

Speaking of big business; the trucking and busing industries need significant regulation of the fume-spewing diesels that operate in our Valley, everything from those large tractor-trailer rigs that deliver goods to our stores and distribution centers to the commercial and city buses that operate one-third-full most of the time.

Eliminating or greatly reducing those significant amounts of pollutants they produce as well as that horrendous ag burning could go a long way to significantly clear our air. Going after the fireplace burners who are simply trying to save some money on those inflated Pacific Gas and Electric bills smacks of a government replete with big business influence.

'Read it and do it'

By Linda Wales
Fresno

The excellent reporting by The Bee staff on the "Last Gasp" coverage is a step in the right direction.

I'm proud of their efforts and for taking a stand on this important issue. You have asked us for our opinion and solutions, so here goes:

First and foremost, read the entire Fresno Bee special report and editorial published on Dec. 15. All the research and vital information has been compiled for you. It's all there.

Second, do what it says. The research and vital information is all there.

Third, Fresno Bee staff and editorial contributors Mark Grossi, Barbara Anderson, Russell Clemings, John Alvin, Theresa Doffing, Mark Crosse and Don Johnson should head up a Valley group to resolve the problem. They know more of what is actually taking place. No need for "outside" experts. Who better?

Threw your copy away? Call The Bee, it'll get you a copy.

Let's not repeat ourselves and kill more trees. Just read it and do it. It's all there.