

Fresno looks to obtain high-speed rail station Officials see benefits for the economy and transportation.

By John Ellis, The Fresno Bee, August 21, 2002

Just in case there was any doubt, Fresno made its case Wednesday for a stop on the state's proposed high-speed rail network.

With the state High Speed Rail Authority holding its monthly public meeting here, city and county officials and a representative from the Fresno Area Residents for Rail Consolidation talked about how the city could benefit from the high-speed rail, and how high-speed rail could benefit from the city.

The testimony was delivered by people who seemed intent on making a point that Fresno and the Valley belonged in a club dominated by Los Angeles and the Bay Area.

Maybe the sparse board attendance had something to do with that: Only three of the authority's nine members and Executive Director Mehdi Morshed made the trip to Fresno City Hall. The 220 mph trains will run from San Diego to Sacramento and the Bay Area via Los Angeles and Fresno. A bill that would authorize asking voters in 2004 to approve a \$9 billion rail bond to pay for most of the first phase should be on Gov. Davis' desk by next week.

On Wednesday, Bruce Rudd, general manager of Fresno Area Express, talked about Fresno's transportation system and how it would benefit an intermodal transportation center -- a downtown Fresno high-speed rail station complemented by regional rail, FAX buses and Greyhound as well as the freeway system.

Rod Diridon, the authority board's chairman, noted that the high-speed rail stations will be few and far between, so access at those stations to as many regional modes of transportation as possible is vital.

Fred Burkhardt, Fresno's economic development manager, said the high-speed rail would be a catalyst for development.

He also said a Fresno high-speed rail station could increase attendance at downtown events by 25% to 30%.

The reporter can be reached at jellis@fresnobee.com or 441-6320.

Board gives dairies go-ahead

By DAVIN McHENRY, Bakersfield Californian, August 22, 2002

County leaders signed off on the controversial Borba dairies Tuesday -- for the third time in a row.

The twin 14,000-cow dairies got a unanimous thumbs up from the county Board of Supervisors after they saw the latest environmental research on the project. The supervisors had approved the dairies twice before, but their decisions were essentially nullified by court action.

"Hopefully the third time's the charm," said George Borba, who first proposed the project with his cousin James Borba more than four years ago.

Tuesday's vote sets the stage for another court appearance for the Chino cousins, sometime in upcoming months.

Their dairies have been entangled in legal challenges almost since their 1998 inception. Currently the project faces a lawsuit by the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment and Sierra Club, which have steadfastly opposed the project.

Before the project can move forward, the latest environmental research must be greenlighted by Judge Roger Randall, who has stalled the dairies twice before. Both times, Randall said the dairy needed more environmental review.

The last time, in April, Randall ordered the Borbas to tweak some dust estimates and explain why it wasn't feasible to downsize the two dairies.

The Borbas did just that in May. According to their numbers, cutting their herd size by half -- or even just 10 percent -- would push the project into the red.

But critics -- primarily the center and Sierra Club -- say the Borbas' numbers are wrong. Center Attorney Brent Newell argued Tuesday that the Borba numbers do not include the cost savings from having such a large herd.

"They are using costs from a 1,000-cow dairy," he said. "They aren't factoring in economies of scale.

"It offends common sense to say that a reduced herd size isn't feasible," he added.

The Borbas' consultants, WZI Inc., argued that adjusting the numbers for economies of scale would be "speculative."

By leaving those figures out, WZI Vice President Jesse Frederick said the Borba numbers were more "conservative."

After the hearing, George Borba said he wasn't even sure whether the full project would be economically viable.

"We just don't know," he said. "It all depends on the price of milk and the price has been very low."

In casting their votes Tuesday, supervisors largely ignored the fine detail of the economic analysis. Instead, they focused on oft-repeated complaints that the dairies are too large and would add too much air pollution to Kern County's already hazy skies.

Supervisor Steve Perez argued that the county cannot freeze all new economic development because of the air situation.

"Do we stop every intensive use in the county?" he said.

Supervisor Pete Parra argued the county must balance air quality vs. job creation in casting his vote. He also compared the Borba dairies -- larger than most existing dairies -- to the trend toward "big box" and "mega" retail stores.

"Every day you pick up the paper you see large new retail establishments like that being considered," he said.

Supervisors also argued the Borba dairies will be some of the most clean milk producers around.

"It is like no other dairy we have seen," Perez said.

Farmers struggling with rules

By MARYLEE SHRIDER , Bakersfield Californian, August 22, 2002

California farmers grappling with rising production costs and a mountain of environmental regulations say the industry's greatest threat may be the growing divide between farmers and the urbanites who buy their produce.

Urban ignorance of how and where crops are grown could eventually contribute to the industry's demise, Kern grower Edwin Camp said Tuesday at the National Agriculture Marketing Association's Ag Issues Conference in Tulare.

"The farmer's biggest challenge is the business-unfriendly atmosphere in California," Camp said. "How do you overcome that? It has to come down to a unified voice, but in California we're dealing with an urbanized, far-away population."

Camp spoke at the conference along with Sun World International's Senior Vice President of Operations Kevin Andrew and gubernatorial candidate Bill Simon. About 100 growers and agri-businessmen from throughout the Central Valley attended the conference at the Heritage Complex for updates on international trade, biotechnology, ag economics and the war on the glassy-winged sharpshooter.

Simon, the event's keynote speaker, said Californians must put a lid on rising production costs and relieve growers of suffocating regulations that "tell farmers where, when and how to farm."

"We need to find a balance with regulations, which does not imply overdevelopment," Simon said. "There is no one more committed to protecting the land than farmers."

The most recent threat to California agriculture, Simon said, is Senate bill 1736, the binding arbitration bill now awaiting Gov. Davis' signature. Simon condemned the bill as an "odious," saying the bill would kill jobs and make a mockery of the ag industry's established bargaining process.

"I would veto it," said Simon of the bill. "And I would veto it every single year I was in office."

The glassy-winged sharpshooter, the Pierce's disease-carrying pest that threatens Kern's multimillion-dollar grape industry, was also on the agenda. Chair of the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Pierce's Disease Advisory Task Force, Andrew acknowledged the pest has the power to obliterate grape production, but said the fight to lower its numbers is gaining momentum. This year, he said, growers of citrus, almonds and other produce are jumping into the fray.

"There's a lot of positive news from our 13,000-acre pilot project," he said. "We're making some headway, but treatments have to be comprehensive. Everyone has to come together on it."

Group to fight for cleaner air

By Mike Jensen, Merced Sun-Star, August 22, 2002

Doctors, lawyers and environmentalists have joined forces in an effort to clean up the Central Valley's air pollution.

The group, calling itself the California Clean Air Campaign, launched a new Web site this week intended to educate Valley residents about the federal [Clean Air Act](http://www.epa.gov/oar/oaq_caa.html) [<http://www.epa.gov/oar/oaq_caa.html>](http://www.epa.gov/oar/oaq_caa.html), the Valley's air pollution and ways for residents to get involved.

The group hopes its efforts will pressure the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District](http://www.valleyair.org/) [<http://www.valleyair.org/>](http://www.valleyair.org/) into doing more to clean the Valley's air.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday Earthjustice and the Environmental Law and Justice Clinic filed legal documents asking that they be allowed to defend the federal EPA in a legal challenge filed by the [California Farm Bureau Federation](http://www.cfbf.com) [<http://www.cfbf.com>](http://www.cfbf.com).

In February, the two environmental groups sued the EPA over an air pollution exemption allowed for agriculture. In May, the EPA agreed to begin permitting agricultural polluters. The California Farm Bureau Federation challenged the settlement.

The Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment in July also filed a request to argue on behalf of the EPA. That group was also part of the original lawsuit.

As for the California Clean Air Coalition, its members include representatives from the Sierra Club, Earthjustice, Medical Advocates for Healthy Air and the Latinos Issue Forum.

The Central Valley air basin is currently considered to be in "severe" noncompliance with the federal Clean Air Act. The Valley air district, which has failed to meet key dates in developing cleanup plans, is expected to request that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declare the Valley air in "extreme" noncompliance, which is the most severe level of noncompliance. Los Angeles is the only other air basin in the nation to be in "extreme" noncompliance.

Just last week, the Valley's air pollution was so bad that the air district recommended school children in Clovis, Fresno and Bakersfield should stay in doors. Merced County air pollution reached levels considered "very unhealthy" by the air district, and residents were urged to limit their time outdoors.

The American Lung Association has said the city of Merced ranks is the seventh most polluted area the nation. Bakersfield is second, and Fresno is third. All are within the jurisdiction of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Kevin Hall, a native of Fresno and a member of the Sierra Club who helped organize the clean air coalition, said in an Earthjustice press release, "People in the Valley are angry and frustrated. They need good information and they want to take action. This campaign and Web site will provide tools for all these needs."

David Granados, program manager for Latino Issues Forum in Fresno, said in the press release, "There is no denying we have a severe air pollution problem here in the San Joaquin Valley. Asthma and other upper respiratory diseases are wreaking havoc on our children.

"Especially hard hit are the farmworker and other low-income families, who also lack suitable health care coverage. This is an extremely serious health crisis with an obvious solution, strict enforcement of the laws and access to health care for all."

Dr. David Pepper, a family physician in Fresno and a member of the Clean Air Coalition, said Wednesday that the Valley air district has not done enough to clean the air.

"They keep trying to push it on to other people," he said.

Pepper said the air district needs to make more of an effort to partner with other agencies, such as the EPA and Caltrans, to address public transit and urban sprawl issues in the Valley.

He also was critical of Clean Air Act exemptions for agriculture and the oil industry.

Pepper also said the public needs to do more to improve the air, such as using electric lawnmowers and carpooling.

"What we're looking at is a lifestyle change," he said.

The coalition's Web site – www.calcleanair.org – shows pictures of a vehicle's tailpipe spewing blue-gray exhaust, a silhouette of a person about to use an asthma inhaler and what appears to be a factory smoke stack belching white smoke or water vapor.

The site provides information about how smog is produced and how it affects peoples' health. The site also has numerous links to newspaper articles and editorials on Valley air pollution.

The site provides an overview of how regulatory agencies are involved with the Valley's air pollution and links to some of the agencies' Web sites. Studies on health and air pollution are also available.

Visitors to the site can even find links to write a letter to the EPA or the editor of their local newspaper.

Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman with the Valley air district, said Wednesday that there are a few factual errors on the Web site, but she declined to say what they are.

"I applaud their efforts," she said. "We want to be their partner in this. We're open to working with anybody."

She also defended the air district, saying it has done all it can with the sources it regulates. The district is primarily responsible for industrial sources and has no authority over vehicles, boats, and trucks, which produce about 60 percent of the Valley's air pollution, according to the air district.

In the last 10 years, the air district has reduced air pollution by 50 percent with sources it regulates, Merced Bello said.

"I would say the numbers speak for themselves," she added.

Plant has burning question

By ERIN WALDNER, Bakersfield Californian

Operators are having trouble starting a 1,048-megawatt power plant currently under construction in western Kern County, according to a spokesman for the California Energy Commission.

The commission has received a request to start the turbines at La Paloma, a natural gas-fired power plant going up near McKittrick, with propane.

"It's a real minor thing," said Chris Davis, a spokesman for the energy commission. "It won't change the emissions at all."

Operators recently experienced technical difficulties while using natural gas to ignite the plant's main gas turbine from a cold start, according to a notice from the energy commission.

Davis said propane produces a hotter flame than natural gas and will be more effective during cold start ignition.

"It starts easier with propane," he said.

Once started, the plant will be switched over to natural gas.

The propane would be stored within the turbine buildings in 100-pound cylinders.

The request to use propane comes from commission staff members.

Davis said the main reason for the formal request is so the energy commission's paperwork is the same as the air district's.

The request could be brought before the energy commission when it meets in regular session Sept. 25.

Energy commission staff members will publish an analysis of the request in the next several weeks.

PG&E National Energy Group, based in Bethesda, Md., is building the \$500 million power plant. Company officials could not be reached for comment Monday.

The plant is scheduled to go online by the end of the year. Construction is 95 percent complete, according to the energy commission.

Once fully operational, La Paloma will provide energy for more than 1 million homes.

It is one of five power plants scheduled to go online in Kern County in the next several years.

The energy commission approved La Paloma in October 1999.

Modesto Bee, Community Briefs, August 21, 2002

ENVIRONMENT

New Web site launched

A coalition of medical, community and environmental groups in the San Joaquin Valley launched a Web site Tuesday designed to educate people about the valley's bad air and prompt them to lobby government officials to take steps to clean it. The site is an effort to halt skyrocketing rates of asthma and respiratory illness in the valley. The campaign is a project of the Sierra Club's Motherlode, Tehipite and Kaweah chapters, the Latino Issues Forum, the Fresno-based Medical Advocates for Healthy Air, the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, and Earthjustice. The Web site address is <http://www.calcleanair.org>.

Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee, August 22, 2002

Bad air days: Schools have a duty to students

Jack Departeau, Clovis

I am writing to express my concern over the lack of consideration by the Clovis Unified School District regarding the air quality their students are subject to. An emergency was declared Aug. 13 and Aug. 14 by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. When this edict is issued, the state requires that all students be indoors, especially during the peak hours of 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. Everyone is asked not to use mowers and other gas-powered equipment.

Despite the fact the air quality was in an emergency state, Clovis Unified still allowed its maintenance employees to use gas-powered mowers and leaf blowers on campus. During school registration, employees used gas-powered hedge clippers and raked up clouds of dust within a few feet of students. It does not take a genius to figure out that the air is horrendous and they are adding to the problem.

Clovis Unified is supposed to be in the business of caring for the needs of students. This not only means caring for their education, it also means caring for their safety. Why is a district that is supposed to care for students adding to the problem? One wonders whether the administration in air-conditioned offices, removed from the realities of life, really cares about the students it serves.

It's time for some 'major changes'

Edythe E. Corum, Clovis

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District thinks that bumping us from "severe" to "extreme" in terms of air pollution will buy us time (eight years, to be exact) to meet federal standards for air quality, thus holding off federal intervention for the time being. After all, federal intervention could mean mandatory no-drive days.

But isn't that what we desperately need? One whiff of the air around here lately is enough to make even the most hardened SUV driver realize that mandatory no-drive days are just what the doctor ordered.

A patient with lung cancer would be foolish to keep smoking cigarettes. So why do the inhabitants of a city with unhealthful air continue to drive polluting vehicles?

The idea behind voluntary "Spare the Air" days is all very well and good, but if no one's going to abide by it (and I haven't noticed any reduction in traffic or lawn mower and leaf blower use), then maybe more stringent measures are in order.

It's high time we admit that the automobile is an unworthy servant to which we've become enslaved, and look at alternate methods of transporting ourselves around this city.

Do we really want to buy time and keep breathing polluted air for another eight years, or do we want to make some major changes now that will begin to restore the clean air that our lungs all crave?

I opt for the latter. I ask those who agree to call the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District at 230-6000 to let their voices be heard.