

Push for clean air focus of hearing

Operation Clean Air campaign draws questions, criticism at Florez forum.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

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The voluntary campaign known as Operation Clean Air was portrayed Wednesday night as a sincere-but-hurried push from local politicians, businesses and industry to clean up the San Joaquin Valley's murky air.

Leaders of the effort and many others testified before state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, who continues hearings all over the Valley to refine a series of air pollution measures he has proposed.

Florez plans another trip to Fresno on May 16 to discuss respiratory illnesses and air pollution.

Operation Clean Air was the main subject Wednesday, and criticisms that originally came from the League of Women Voters, Fresno Metro Ministry and the local Sierra Club chapter surfaced over and over. Why weren't more community groups included among the government, business and industry representatives of Operation Clean Air? Why were so many segments of society left out at the group's summit to launch the campaign last month? "If you went to the summit," said Carolina Simunovic of Metro Ministry, "you could see it was not representative or reflective of our community."

Mayor Alan Autry, who along with county Supervisor Bob Waterston launched the voluntary effort, explained that the intention has always been to bring in all groups and represent all residents. But he and Waterston said Operation Clean Air has been pressed for time.

The Valley is faced with firm deadlines in the next seven years, and federal penalties for not attaining the health standard could cost the Valley many millions. The effort will take many years.

"I needed to focus on all the volunteer efforts we could find," Autry said. "This is a work in progress."

But environmentalist Kevin Hall of the Sierra Club said the campaign looks more like a "quasi-government agency" that will be looking for a lot of public money.

Operation Clean Air is aiming at \$200 million or more in federal money to help fund pollution-reduction efforts. The campaign also is pushing for federal legislation to declare the Valley as an Air Quality Empowerment Zone, which would provide tax incentives and possibly low-interest loans to people who invest in clean-air alternatives.

Hall and others are asking: Who is in charge of the process? How will Operation Clean Air prove that it is reducing air pollution? How does the public enter the discussion?

"I see very little oversight," Hall said.

But lawyer Hal Bolen II of the Fresno Business Council said the empowerment zone idea is in its infancy. Those questions have not been answered because officials are just now investigating them.

Bolen, who is leading the investigation of the idea, said it is possible the zone could be established this year, but it will take a lot of work. "It's our hope to produce a victory," he said.

Operation Clean Air officials brushed aside a critic's suggestion that the voluntary effort is a way to distract from the legal cleanup taking place at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Autry said, "We are not asking for any relief from the Clean Air Act. We've made that plain from the beginning."

Wheels of the future

Prototype fuel cell vehicles will make an appearance in the Valley.

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We may get a close look at our driving future next week, when a traveling road show of prototype fuel-cell cars makes its way through the Valley, with stops in Fresno and Merced. It's called the "Rally Thru the Valley," and it will give many residents a chance to see this tantalizing technology for the first time.

Fuel cell vehicles tantalize, of course, because they are zero-emission cars. They emit none of the pollutants that are spewed from internal combustion engines. In a Valley plagued by foul air, that's a dream come true.

There's a catch, of course. The technology isn't ready for the marketplace yet, and there's no way to predict when that might happen. Some of these prototypes carry a price tag in excess of \$1 million. (There's a sticker shock of the first order.)

But the research goes on, pushed forward in large part by the commitment President Bush made in his State of the Union Address on Jan. 28. The president proposed \$1.2 billion in funding for research "so that America can lead the world in developing clean, hydrogen-powered automobiles," in his words.

It's good to see that UC Merced a co-sponsor -- along with the Sacramento-based California Fuel Cell Partnership -- of the Merced leg of the road trip.

UC Merced, as it grows and matures, has a chance to do for environmental sciences and the San Joaquin Valley what Berkeley and Stanford did for Silicon Valley -- be the seed bed of dramatic advances in science and engineering -- and the tremendous economic benefit they produce.

The cars on parade next week come from DaimlerChrysler, Ford, General Motors, Honda, Hyundai, Nissan, Toyota and Volkswagen, most of them members of the partnership along with oil companies, research firms and various government agencies. Check it out.

Improving bus service must be a priority

Visalia Times-Delta EDITORIALS, May 8, 2003

Public transportation in this area goes begging for respect most of the time. Especially hard-pressed to get attention are the people who rely on Visalia City Coach buses.

That makes it all the more important that elected representatives be advocates for those who use the buses and rectify the problems they encounter.

And there are problems. According to the results of an annual transit survey in January, Visalia City Coach buses are not meeting the goals set previously for on-time performance. Systemwide buses run on time 72 percent of the time, which admittedly is an improvement over the past but still well below the goal of 90 percent.

The biggest problem appears to be that buses are leaving their stops early. On one of the main routes in Visalia, buses left their stops early 50 percent of the time. On another route, it was 70 percent.

For people who rely on the bus, leaving a stop early can be more frustrating than getting to a destination late, because there is no way the rider can make up the wasted time spent waiting for the next bus.

Even more discouraging about the results of this survey is that Laidlaw Transportation, which operates Visalia City Coach, installed remedies to improve service after the poor results of last year's survey. It added five minutes to routes to give drivers more time to meet the schedule and increased the number of spot checks. One out of four buses still don't run on time.

Monday night the City Council talked about solutions, including seeking grants to provide more financing. This isn't about the money, however. It's about performance. Getting the buses to run on time takes more oversight, not more money.

The Visalia City Council ought to take the lead on that: Instead of waiting for the report on the annual survey, give Laidlaw three months to improve the service and report back. Monitor it every month if necessary until the on-time goal is met.

And if not, invoke the penalties to which the city apparently has recourse but hasn't used. The ultimate penalty, of course, is to change companies.

There is also a public perception that very few people ride the buses, and that's not true. A significant number of people rely on the bus service, which provided 1.2 million rides to passengers, in fiscal year 2001-02.

We hope that members of the Visalia City Council agree that taking care of this issue needs to be one of their top priorities, most of all because it affects people who are not their typical constituents. The users of public bus service are generally not as empowered or enfranchised as other residents of Visalia. They are students, the elderly, the handicapped and the working poor. They often have no one to speak on their behalf. Many of them wouldn't be able to attend a Visalia City Council meeting, because the buses don't run that late. We urge the council to work as diligently on this problem for their behalf as if they were regular bus passengers. We can tell from his comments at the meeting that council member Phil Cox takes that responsibility seriously.

Residents unhappy with fireplace restriction plan

Tony Biasotti

Tracy Press, May 8, 2003

MODESTO -The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's plan to restrict fireplaces has a lot of valley residents in a slow burn.

They voiced their frustrations at a public workshop Wednesday to solicit comments on the district's latest draft of the proposal. About 50 people attended, the vast majority of them opposed to the regulations.

If the plan is approved, it will prohibit burning wood in stoves or fireplaces on days when the valley's air quality reaches unhealthy levels. In a typical winter, there are about 25 such days in Fresno and far fewer in San Joaquin County. Gas stoves and fireplaces would be exempt, along with wood stoves that are the only source of a household's heat.

Tracy resident Steve Richards said this leaves out people who have central heating but save money by heating all or part of their homes with wood-burning

stoves. He abandoned his central heating after a gas leak in his home, and he said his wood stove is far more efficient.

"My impact was pretty evident from the first utility bill," he said. "The cost of gas was prohibitive for me. There were times, even with a dual income, when we couldn't afford to run it."

Kathleen Harris, a Ripon almond grower, said burning wood for heat makes sense because she gets the firewood from her own orchard.

"What do we do with our trees if we can't burn them?" she said. "I have not used the heater in my home since 1998."

The district's surveys consistently show that most people use their fireplaces less than once a week, for ambiance or aesthetics, rather than heat, said APCD senior planner Tom Jordan.

That right should be protected, said Modesto developer Shel Thompson.

"There's something primeval about sitting in front of a fire, and sitting in front of a gas burner just doesn't cut it," he said.

Louise Johnson, a representative of the Catholic diocese of Stockton, was one of the only people to speak in favor of the no-burn nights.

"I think that in Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties, which is the area of our diocese, we can sacrifice up to 10 nights a year of not burning our fireplaces for the common good of those who are vulnerable in our society," she said.

Residential no-burn nights have been voluntary for the past decade, but the pollution district plans to make them mandatory in November. The new rules are a response to an order from the federal Environmental Protection Agency to reduce particulate matter - tiny particles like dust, smoke and soot that can become lodged in people's lungs and cause or aggravate respiratory problems.

The impact of wood-burning stoves and fireplaces on the San Joaquin Valley's air quality is a matter of debate. The APCD says that residential wood burning is a serious polluter, contributing 15 to 23 percent of the 25 tons of particulate matter in the valley's air on a typical winter day, and as much as 30 percent on the worst days.

The Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association, an industry group whose members sell and manufacture both wood and gas stoves and fireplaces, disputes those findings. An independent analysis sponsored by the group found that residential wood burning accounts for 2.5 percent of the valley's particulate matter.

"Thirty percent gets repeated over and over again by the district and in the media, and people believe that all the time emissions across the valley are 30

percent wood smoke," said Chris Caron, a vice president with Stockton-based Duraflame, an HPBA member.

Caron and other industry members want the no-burn rules to include an exemption for wood-burning stoves and fireplaces certified as low-emission by the Environmental Protection Agency, or those equipped with EPA-certified inserts.

An EPA-certified insert can reduce emissions by as much as 90 percent, and manufactured firelogs, like those produced by Duraflame, emit about two-thirds less particulate matter than a wood fire.

"Not making a distinction for EPA-certified stoves and inserts just doesn't make sense," HPBA spokesman John Crouch said.

The APCD will accept comments on the proposed regulations through May 23.

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