

Florez touts clean-air bond

The Shafter Democrat says a \$4.5 billion bond measure would help clean San Joaquin Valley air.

By Lesli A. Maxwell

Bee Capitol Bureau

(Published Thursday, April 3, 2003, 5:13 AM)

SACRAMENTO -- It could be a question for voters to consider next year: Should billions of dollars in taxpayer money be spent to clean up the San Joaquin Valley's dirty and unhealthy air?

Sen. Dean Florez thinks so. The Shafter Democrat is pushing to place a \$4.5 billion statewide bond measure on the November 2004 ballot that would subsidize a range of clean-air initiatives -- much of it directed at private industry to reduce pollution.

Still being fine-tuned, the bond measure would accompany Florez's controversial package of air-quality bills that seek to crack down on air emissions from farms, cars and fireplaces.

Nearly \$2 billion of the bond would be aimed at helping farming operations and dairies pay the steep costs of reducing air pollution, with another \$400 million going to trucking companies to replace dirty diesel engines. Florez says the bond is recognition of how hard-pressed farmers will be to afford strict regulations that could be imposed on them.

Other provisions of the bond would pay for more aggressive asthma screening and prevention in schools, retrofitting dirty engines on school buses, and buying monitoring equipment and hiring more personnel for local air districts.

"If we're going to be serious about cleaning the air, we need some money," Florez said. "Clean air isn't free ... and there's nothing in the state budget that is going to help us do this."

The proposal -- which hasn't circulated widely yet -- is, so far, drawing more skepticism than support. Florez is hoping to win backing from a Valley Republican like Sen. Chuck Poochigian, who said he is carefully considering the issue.

No one disputes the high public health and economic costs if the San Joaquin Valley doesn't clean up its air.

Home to some of the worst air in the nation, more than 300,000 Valley residents suffer from chronic breathing problems. Federal and state officials face tremendous pressure to clean up the air in the eight-county region. Regulators face a 2005 federal deadline to reduce smog in the Valley or risk sanctions that

would cost businesses millions of dollars in fines and freeze \$2 billion in transportation funds statewide.

But farmers and clean-air activists alike question the political viability of a statewide bond measure that might be seen as mostly beneficial to private industry in one region of the state.

"Where I agree with Florez is the need to identify revenue sources that can help clean our air," said Kevin Hall, a Fresno clean-air activist and member of the Sierra Club. "But how do you argue for a bond that is going to support private industry?"

Hall points to one source of money that local air districts have so far failed to tap -- fees for developers who build large subdivisions and distribution centers that later create traffic and air pollution.

"Before going to the taxpayers, I'd like to see an estimate of how much money could be generated from those sources," Hall said.

Farmer Paul Betancourt wonders how receptive voters would be to a large-scale bond when the state is in such poor financial condition.

Still, he agrees with Florez that it's going to take millions of dollars to help farmers adjust to some proposed air-quality rules -- including a ban on open-field burning of agriculture waste.

Florez is pushing to outlaw the practice and require that biomass plants grind the waste to produce energy. The bond measure includes \$500 million to help move growers away from burning and to sustain biomass plants.

Betancourt says the bond won't stem the conflict between growers and Florez over the lawmaker's SB 700, the measure that would repeal the decades-old state law that exempts farms from federal air-pollution permits. Farm and federal officials believe the exemption can simply be amended, instead of discarded.

Gary Conover, a lobbyist for Western United Dairymen, says Florez is showing sensitivity to the high costs of stiffer air regulations on farms and dairies.

Florez is confident that voters will be persuaded to support the bond for similar reasons.

"It's fair to ask everyone to help pay for fixing this problem," he said.

Staff writer Mark Grossi contributed to this report. The reporter can be reached at Imaxwell@fresnobee.com or (916) 326-5541.

Reimbursement sought in debris fire

State agency's request for \$750,000 from Crippen is just one of several demands.

By Russell Clemings

The Fresno Bee

(Published Thursday, April 3, 2003, 5:13 AM)

The bills continue to pile up for Archie Crippen, with a state environmental agency now asking for an estimated \$750,000 in firefighting costs plus an unspecified additional amount -- possibly in the millions -- for a cleanup at the site of his monthlong debris pile fire in southwest Fresno.

The latest demand from the California Integrated Waste Management Board was contained in a Fresno County Superior Court lawsuit filed late last week. It was preceded by a demand from the city of Fresno for \$607,000 to cover its own firefighting costs.

City officials have estimated that the eventual costs may reach \$4.5 million for the Crippen fire and its cleanup. The fire started Jan. 11 in an immense pile of debris from demolished buildings and other sources; it burned for a month, cloaking parts of the metropolitan area in harsh smoke for days at a time.

Crippen's attorney, Edwin A. Oeser, said his client had not yet been notified of the lawsuit and, in any case, was busy preparing for a mid-April hearing before the city Planning Commission, which is considering an appeal of the city's order revoking Crippen's land-use permits.

"We need to fight that battle first and worry about this one later," Oeser said.

If the city's permit action is not overturned, he said, Crippen will be unable to operate even those portions of his business -- a concrete and asphalt recycling facility and a public truck scale -- that were not directly involved in the fire.

"If that happens," Oeser added, "the chances of them being able to recover any money at all will be greatly diminished."

Integrated Waste Management Board officials declined to comment on their lawsuit, which asks for both reimbursement of firefighting and other costs, as well as an injunction forcing Crippen to "abate the pile and the effects of the fire."

Previously, the board had sent Crippen a bill for \$580,000, although officials said at the time that the eventual bill for firefighting alone was likely to reach \$700,000 to \$750,000.

In the lawsuit, the board said that it has spent "approximately \$750,000 from the Solid Waste Cleanup Trust Fund to provide expertise, manpower and equipment to assist in controlling the fire."

"Everybody's asking for money," Oeser said. "The city wants \$607,000; the state wants \$700,000 to \$800,000; and that's just for firefighting costs. Can you imagine what the cleanup and abatement is going to cost?"

The federal Environmental Protection Agency now appears poised to make its own request for reimbursement. Crippen said that he received a letter Wednesday from the agency, which said that it wanted to assess his ability to repay its costs.

Among other things, Crippen said, the agency asked him for copies of income tax returns for the past five years.

"They're not going to like that very much," he said. "We lost money three years in a row."

The reporter can be reached at rclemings@fresnobee.com or 441-6371.

Keeping options open

State air board votes to continue zero-emission car mandate.

Editorial, Fresno Bee (Published Thursday, April 3, 2003, 4:50 AM)

An effort to back away from continued production of electric cars -- and a broader commitment to nonpolluting cars -- was turned back last week by the California Air Resources Board. That's good. Accepting the proposal from the CARB staff would have brought the state's historic Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) mandate nearly to an end.

Instead, the board told its staff to revise the proposal to preserve the requirement that at least a few hundred zero-emission vehicles be produced by 2008.

The CARB staff wanted to drop the requirement that 2% of all new cars sold in California after 2005 produce no tail pipe emissions. As a substitute, the staff urged that major vehicle manufacturers be required to produce a total of 250 fuel-cell-powered vehicles in the next five years.

Automakers and others -- including the Bush administration -- now argue that fuel-cell technology represents the future. That's the same thing they were saying about electric-powered cars a few years ago.

But many argue that fuel-cell cars powered by hydrogen are still years away from being produced at a price within reach of consumers. The proposed 250 vehicles would be demonstrator models that currently cost about \$1 million each -- they won't be rolling off the showroom floor in very great numbers.

Nor are electric cars the complete failure that some fuel-cell proponents would have us believe. About 2,500 battery-powered vehicles such as General Motors' EV-1 and the Honda Insight are on the road today. But they have been available for lease only and now the car companies are not allowing customers to renew those leases, presumably because the emphasis is shifting to hybrid and fuel-cell models.

The state's policy has been to favor no specific technology. Regulators should not dismiss electric cars, any more than fuel cell vehicles should be abandoned because they aren't yet available. The technology eggs should be distributed to as many baskets as we can manage.

Doing our part

The Bee joins with the community to help clean up our Valley's air.

Commentary By Ray Steele Jr.

Publisher and President

(Published Thursday, April 3, 2003, 4:50 AM)

"Last Gasp," The Bee's special report on the deteriorating air quality in the San Joaquin Valley, has prompted considerable discussion about how to make improvements. We have pursued the issue with weekly editorials encouraging everyone -- from public agencies to private citizens to businesses -- to do their part.

The Bee is not exempt from the debate. The letter writer at the top of this page enjoins us, in effect, to "put your money where your mouth is."

The Bee tries very hard to live up to what we editorially encourage the citizenry to do. We are extremely conscious of, and take very seriously, our role in the community. We believe that we should do what we advocate in our editorial columns. Here are some of the things we're doing to try to help clean up the air:

We are converting our vehicle fleet to reduce emissions. We have a number of propane-powered vehicles. We recently purchased our first hybrid vehicle and it already is the most-used automobile in our newsroom fleet. We plan to buy more.

We require our drivers to turn off the engines of their vehicles when loading newspapers or making newspaper deliveries at our distribution centers. We require the drivers of our vendors' vehicles to turn off engines when they make deliveries to our plants.

We encourage our employees to carpool. Some employees ride bicycles to work. Some employees work four-day weeks that reduce the number of trips to and from work by 20% a week. We are working with the nearby plants of the U.S. Postal Service and City of Fresno Corporation Yard (all of us operate around the clock) to develop an express bus system to shuttle employees from near their homes to their workplaces so each of us can reduce the number of vehicle trips our employees take.

Our efforts extend beyond vehicles. We purchased a press that uses water-based inks rather than oil-based inks. This eliminates ink misting that can escape into the atmosphere. It also significantly reduces the use of solvents to clean our presses. We installed dust collectors on our presses to gather paper dust so it does not escape into the atmosphere. We use propane- and electric-powered equipment to move pallets and 2,500-pound newsprint rolls.

Just as important, we encourage our employees to follow our advice and not burn wood in their fireplaces or use charcoal or wood in their barbecues. And we provide alerts to our employees on ways they can help reduce pollution.

As we have said in our editorials, it is important for each of us to do our part. Can we do more? You bet. And we will.

The Bee should follow its own advice on air quality

Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee

By Mark Rapin

Fresno

(Published Thursday, April 3, 2003, 5:21 AM)

The Bee operates a very large fleet of vehicles within the state of California. How many and what percentage of these vehicles are electric, hybrids, alternative fuel vehicles, practically zero-emission vehicles, compressed natural gas, propane or any other fuels besides gas and diesel?

The automotive manufacturers want to build clean vehicles with power trains that consumers are willing to purchase for a profit. These new technologies are expensive and untested in real world fleet situations.

I don't believe The Bee, consumers or other fleets are ready to make the investment and suffer the expense during the testing phase of new technologies. If this is really what we want then speak with your wallets. Until then let's trust the auto manufacturers and the California Air Resources Board to develop and test these new technologies on a realistic timetable.

In the Modesto Bee, "Letters from Our Readers"

Try hybrid cars

Published: April 3, 2003, 05:58:09 AM PST

There is a lot of complaining about air pollution in this state. What is being done about it? President Bush suggested research on hydrogen fuel cell cars. It has been estimated that it will take at least 10 years, maybe 20, to develop them. Not a good option.

Both Toyota and Honda have hybrids on the market now. We bought a Toyota Prius, a five-passenger sedan, and like it very much. It has all the bells and whistles of gas-powered cars.

These cars are here now and they are affordable. They get from 46 to 52 miles per gallon, and are powered by gas and electricity. The batteries are self-charging. They do not have to be plugged in. The car is always ready to go.

It also has ultra-low emission. It has been estimated that in the next 10 to 20 years, or possibly five to 10 years, we will be seeing large numbers of these hybrids on the road. If the U.S. automakers can't come up with something comparable, we will buy Japanese cars. There should be more publicity about the hybrids in the media.

Less dependence on foreign oil could make wars being fought over oil obsolete.

VI PURVIS
Turlock

Don't give up on ZEV program

Editorial, Merced Sun-Star

Wednesday, April 02, 2003

California's aggressive electric car program - endangered by a proposal recommending its elimination - may get its batteries recharged after all.

The California Air Resources Board decided last week to postpone a decision on an ill-advised staff proposal that would spell almost certain doom for the electric vehicle. Board members need more time and are "wrangling over a lot of issues," a spokesman said.

Let the wrangling begin. At least the board is thinking through this important decision, which we find encouraging.

Here are a few tidbits to wrangle:

. Giving up on the Zero Emissions Vehicle program isn't going to help clean the Central Valley's famously unhealthy air. Under the existing plan, 2 percent of all new cars sold in California after 2005 must produce no tailpipe emissions. Automakers want that provision eliminated.

The staff plan would allow some gasoline-hybrid vehicles to qualify as ZEVs. It also would require the automakers to develop only about 41 zero-emission fuel-cell vehicles through 2008 per automaker.

The bottom line here, board members, is that gasoline-hybrid vehicles still pollute our air. Why should we let the automakers off the hook?

. Forcing automakers to create a nonpolluting vehicle is the only way a viable zero-emission car will become a reality. Despite enthusiasm for the electric car, both domestic and foreign car makers have all but abandoned the programs. Drivers of the prototype vehicles say the car companies never made an effort to improve or market the cars. Today, ZEVs are no longer sold or supported.

If the ZEV program is curtailed, it will deal a death blow to the program and further postpone the true cleanup of the air we breathe.

. It's not just a health issue. The Central Valley has earned the unglamorous designation of being home to some of the foulest, most wretched air in America. Because of this, businesses are loath to locate here for fear of the health of their workers, among other concerns.

If the air resources board doesn't do everything it can to clean the air, the economic impact here will be staggering.

The Valley is growing by leaps and bounds, but the air question will threaten all attempts to diversify the local economy. We see economic diversification as the only way to break the cycle of grinding poverty that taxes local resources and negatively affects the area's ability to attract and retain business.

For these reasons and more, we urge the air resources board to turn down the staff recommendation and move forward with the ZEV program. A "no" vote, for sure, will send a message to Detroit and the rest of the country that California is serious about cleaning up its polluted air.

Letters to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian
April 3, 2003

SUVS add to pollution

I hope people will stop defending their SUVs and realize that the concern is not for their size or lifestyle status as much as it is for their engine design. Currently SUVs and pickup trucks do not have to meet the much lower pollution standards of "regular" cars so they produce more smog-creating emissions.

This means that every bit of gas used causes more pollution when it's running an SUV or pickup. And with low gas mileage there's also more pollution per trip. Even though all vehicles of the past couple of decades are less-polluting than earlier ones, we as a population are driving more cars because there are more of us! No wonder we have a problem.

If we want to lay blame anywhere else besides ourselves, let's look at our decision-making agencies such as the EPA and the California Air Resources Board (CARB). Knowing that SUVs and pickups have more polluting engines, they've put off educating us about them and have only recently set a date for requiring better emission standards. And that date is still several years away. It will take us a long time to wear out and replace the present high-polluting vehicles now being driven (and defended).

Compounding the tragedy of unhealthy air is the fact that the auto industry has known how to make all vehicles less polluting but haven't done so because they've not been required to.

LAURA DENNISON, Bakersfield

Letters to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian
April 3, 2003

'Hypocrite of the year'

I've been following the recent debate between Supervisor Ray Watson and Sen. Dean Florez regarding dairy buffer zones in the paper and on the county's cable channel.

Supervisor Watson keeps on criticizing Sen. Florez's proposal, saying that we need local control on these decisions, that we don't need the state telling us what to do.

How right he is. However, Supervisor Watson gets the "Hypocrite of the Year" award hands down, just after being in office a few months.

He obviously forgot that when the Vanderham Dairy was brought before the board last December, representatives from the City of Shafter and the Maple School District said that they didn't want the dairy located so close to them.

These are local people. So what did Watson and the other supervisors do?
Ignored them and imposed the dairy on them. Where was local control then? I
propose a dairy on the corner of Stockdale Highway and Coffee Road so Watson
can get a good whiff when he leaves his house in Stockdale Estates!

MARIE HOWE, Bakersfield