

The year in review

The Bakersfield Californian

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Life-changing events

- * Bakersfield couple Steven and Lyndsey Denny celebrated the birth of quintuplets at a Phoenix hospital Oct. 17. The three boys and two girls weighed between 3 pounds, 6 ounces at the heaviest to 1 pound, 15 ounces for the smallest. All five were able to come home in time for Christmas.
- * A magnitude-6.5 earthquake struck the Central Coast on Dec. 22 and was felt throughout California. It caused severe damage to the Paso Robles area.

Community grab bag

- * Several longtime Bakersfield residents were heartbroken when the historic home of Beatrice Cumby was destroyed. Bulldozed in August under orders by Watson Realty, a community organization had plans to turn the home into an African-American cultural museum. Despite the loss, the African American Historical Cultural Association vowed to move on and find a new site.
- * Bakersfield was named as a site in the National Cemetery Expansion Act of 2003 in November, winning the rights to build one of the nation's newest veterans' cemeteries.
- * A mutant flu strain attacked the nation in late Autumn, including California and Kern County, causing the death of at least one child in Bakersfield in December.

Breathing easy, or trying to

- * For the first time, valley residents were forbidden to use their fireplaces during winter episodes of bad air quality, the result of a controversial rule approved by valley air quality officials.
- * Residents near Lamont raced from their apartment complex Oct. 4 after a noxious chemical gas blew into the area, apparently from a recently treated agricultural field. Four children were taken to hospitals, treated and released.

Schoolhouses rock

- * Fees for undergraduates at Cal State Bakersfield jumped 27.5 percent over the previous year.
- * The state reported in November that less than 30 percent of Kern children passed the state physical fitness tests last year, for the third year in a row.
- * After several years of little growth and poor state and national rankings, 88 percent of Kern County's schools met Academic Performance Index goals in the last academic year, according to reports released by the state.
- * Cal State Bakersfield President Tomás A. Arciniega announced his retirement after more than 20 years with the university. Arciniega wasn't always popular, but left a lasting impression on the school and the community that is his legacy. He officially retires July 1, 2004.

* Faced with a projected \$9.1 million deficit, Bakersfield City School District notified 333 teachers, administrators, clerks, custodians and counselors -- nearly 10 percent of its 3,400-person staff -- that their positions would be eliminated.

* Beardsley School District eighth-grader Gabby McCutcheon saved the life of her school bus driver by radioing for help after a blood clot stopped the driver's heart midway through her morning bus route.

Business as usual -- sort of

* Food Maxx opened at Union and California avenues, followed by Albertsons on Chester Avenue, giving southeast and central Bakersfield shoppers more than 100,000 square feet of long-overdue grocery fare.

* Bakersfield's two largest hometown home builders, Coleman Homes and Kyle Carter Homes, were swallowed up by the big guys. Lennar Corp. bought Coleman in April. The Corky McMillin Cos. snapped up Kyle Carter shortly thereafter.

* Meadows Field officials announced direct routes from Bakersfield to Houston starting in April 2004. Meanwhile, construction began on a new passenger terminal at Meadows, thanks in large part to millions of dollars in federal grants.

* Tejon Ranch Co. had quite a year. The company announced it would sell up to 100,000 of its acres for an environmental preserve. Environmental groups filed a lawsuit over expansion of its industrial complex. The military unexpectedly stepped on Tejon's plans for a proposed 23,000-home community, saying it would interfere with flight paths. Later, an environmental group said it was thinking of buying all of Tejon Ranch, though Tejon chief executive Bob Stine said the ranch isn't for sale.

Passing on

* Helen Rankin, a self-taught cattlemaster and founder of the Quarter Circle U Rankin Guest Ranch, better known as Rankin Ranch, died in February. Rankin opened the Walker Basin guest ranch in 1965, 11 years after the death of husband Leroy Rankin. She was 89.

* Gary Gallon, environmentalist and co-founder of Greenpeace who was raised in Bakersfield, died July 3 in Montreal.

* Alys June Stiern, wife of state Sen. Walter Stiern, education advocate, host of "PTA Coffee Time," died Nov. 29 in Davis. She was 87.

* Ernie Hashim, a drag racing pioneer, died in September. He was 79. He helped found Smokers Inc., which raced on dry lake beds.

* Clarence Medders, who served as Bakersfield's mayor from 1989 to 1993, died in September. He was 75. Medders, known for his integrity and blunt manner, also served on the City Council from 1971 to 1979.

* Two Kern County soldiers died in Iraq in 2003, Sgt. David Perry, originally of Sonora, and Lt. Osbaldo Orozco, of Delano.

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Grants help Valley air

USDA funds assist farms in updating

Friday, Dec. 26, 2003, The Record

By Audrey Cooper

Record Staff Writer

LODI -- The two large diesel engines that once sat in Robert Disch's cattle pasture are more than 30 years old and probably would have gone on powering irrigation pumps for another 30 years.

Yet the pollution-spewing engines are destined for the scrap pile, and two shiny mustard-colored engines were delivered to Disch's 320-acre farm this month to take their place.

Disch was one of 144 San Joaquin County farmers who received grants this year from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to cut air pollution. Farmers who receive grants promise to match the government money dollar for dollar. For Disch, that means his two new engines cost just \$25,000.

Another \$1.5 million likely will be available to county farmers again this year, said Amy Rocha with the Stockton office of the NRCS. The deadline for applications is late January.

"I didn't have to replace them. They worked pretty well. But it's nice to have clean-burning ones," said Disch, 73.

"The money from USDA was a good incentive for people. I think they picked me because my engines were so old," he said.

Only about half of the farmers who applied for the grants

received them this year. Across 10 counties, from Sacramento to Kern, 510 farmers received a total of \$5.5 million in grants, said Anita Brown, a spokeswoman for the NRCS.

Not only will Disch's new engines burn cleaner, sparing Valley skies of smog-creating emissions, but they also might help the cattleman escape potentially expensive permitting rules that will soon apply to farmers for the first time. Permits will be required of all farms that produce more than 10 tons of pollutants a year.

With the cleaner-running engines, Disch will almost certainly escape those requirements.

Not all farmers plan to use the grant money for new diesel engines. Others will use the money to chip farm waste instead of burning it, find ways to reduce tractor trips across fields or reduce dust pollution kicked up on rural roads. Such efforts could reduce particulate pollution, another of the Valley's air-pollution problems.

The incentive program began in 1998 with just \$294,000 and 35 farmers. Since the grant program began, it has helped to cut more than 2,179 tons of air pollutants, according to NRCS.

For more information on the grant program, call (209) 946-6629, ext. 3.

Sierra counties face air cleanup

Rural regions must join in effort of smoggier neighbors.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Monday, December 29, 2003, 5:30 AM)

Mountain-county residents east of the murky San Joaquin Valley are upset over the news that their fresh air soon will be classified as dirty, but that's only part of their bad news.

Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne and Mariposa counties also will be pulled into the massive smog cleanup campaign for the Valley, the second-dirtiest air basin in the country.

And the real downer: Their problem is not home-grown. The Valley is the biggest source of their pollution, sending smog to the mountains on prevailing summer breezes.

Politicians, business owners and civic leaders say it's not fair to drag them into the Valley's air problems.

"I don't have anything that belches smoke here," says Jacqueline Lucido, executive director of the Chamber of Commerce in Amador County, northeast of Modesto. "We sell scenery, wildflowers and blue sky. It's ridiculous to lump us in with the Valley."

None of the four counties violates the current smog standard. Their combined population, about 140,000 people, is one-third the size of Fresno's, and tourism is the biggest industry in the central Sierra.

"It's totally wrong to connect us to the Valley's bad air," says Peggy Mosley, owner of the Groveland Hotel in Tuolumne County, near Yosemite National Park. "We are victims, not participants."

But the counties will have unhealthy air when a new, more-stringent smog or ozone standard begins next year.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says the counties will have to participate in the regional air cleanup. That will involve new rules and possibly clean technology in such businesses as automobile paint shops. Costs of doing business could rise.

Nationally, the EPA is emphasizing regional approaches to air problems, especially when pollution is moving from one area to another. It is not uncommon for cleaner, downwind areas to join in cleanups with more-polluted neighboring areas.

But the California Air Resources Board, the state's air watchdog, disagrees with the EPA's position on the four mountain counties.

Board spokesman Jerry Martin says the mountain counties would have a more focused cleanup if they remained separate from the Valley. He adds that political problems could develop between the counties in the Valley air district.

One possible source of friction: The counties would not have representatives on the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's governing board.

Each of the Valley's eight counties already has one representative on the board. The air board would have to work with county officials in each jurisdiction.

"Something would have to be worked out between those counties and the district," Martin says. "The more groups you involve in the process, the tougher it will be to make decisions."

The whole issue has been triggered by a new ozone standard that will no longer be based on one-hour or peak readings. Instead, officials will rely on an eight-hour average, which health experts consider a better gauge of long-term exposure to bad air.

Ozone, the chief ingredient in smog, is a corrosive gas that forms in summer and aggravates lung problems.

The eight-hour readings have been recorded for years, but they have not been used for enforcement. When the change is made, no place in the country will have more violations than the Valley.

The bad-air stigma troubles people in mountain counties.

"We don't like that," says Diane Gray, executive director of the Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce. "This affects our quality of life. We're still small and rural, and we have a lot of retired people."

Adds Amador County Supervisor Louis Boitano: "We've lost industries and we don't have many polluters left here, yet we're being penalized for pollution coming from the Valley."

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Wind forecast to clear dirty air

Jet stream is pushing rainy, snowy storms into the Valley.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Thursday, December 25, 2003, 6:59 AM)

A 150-mph wind whistling high above Central California is blowing more than Santa's sleigh into your Christmas morning.

The so-called jet stream is bringing blustery storms to the San Joaquin Valley and scouring out air pollution. Now, with better air quality, you have the green light to burn the yuletide log in the fireplace.

If the weather were still and foggy, air officials might have been forced to ban Christmas Day wood burning under the authority of a new rule passed last summer.

But the jet stream saved that part of local holiday cheer.

"These are rigorous storms," said supervising meteorologist Evan Shipp of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "They're really digging down into the lower atmosphere and moving the air."

Forecasters say rain should pelt the Valley and snow should blanket the Sierra all the way down to 3,000 feet tonight. The National Weather Service predicted up to an inch of rain for Fresno and possible blizzard conditions above 7,000 feet in the mountains.

Air district officials had worried about Christmas because it's the time of year when dense fog and thousands of burning fireplaces turn the air into a damp, sooty mess. The brew pushes the Valley into a violation of the federal health standard.

The new no-burn rule was required after the Valley missed cleanup deadlines for soot, ash and other particle pollution. The pollution is linked to premature death, chronic bronchitis and other lung problems.

Officials estimated up to 25 no-burn days would be called in counties with large cities, such as Fresno and Bakersfield. In metropolitan areas of the Valley, residential burning accounts for 30% of the particle pollution from November to February.

The district has had only one no-burn day so far, and that was in mid-November for Fresno and Kern counties. But even with favorable meteorology, the air still can be fouled by wood smoke.

"If everybody lights up on a specific night, the air's capacity can still be overwhelmed," said Shipp. "It could happen even though we have these storms clearing things out."

The holiday storms appear poised to do their part for Valley air over the next several days, according to the Weather Service. Meteorologists said the jet stream, which is five or six miles above the ground, will be blowing with a lot of intensity through the weekend.

The wind is picking up storms as it crosses the Pacific Ocean from west to east. Meteorologist Mark Burger of the Weather Service's Hanford office said storms from as far away as Japan are being catapulted to California.

"Individual storms become difficult to predict as far as timing goes because the jet stream brings them in so quickly in this situation," said Burger. "That's why we're keeping precipitation in the forecast through next Tuesday."

The Valley has been relatively dry over the last few months, Burger said. While Northern California has recorded above-average precipitation, Fresno had about 60% of its average rainfall through Wednesday morning.

"If we get some large storms," Burger said, "we can make that up pretty quickly."

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White House Change to Clean Air Act Blocked

Federal appeals court panel rules that letting companies put off installation of pollution controls could cause 'irreparable harm.'

By Gary Polakovic, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer - 12-25-03

A federal appeals court Wednesday blocked new rules by the Bush administration that would exempt companies from installing state-of-the-art air pollution controls when they modify or expand their plants.

The changes, some of the most contentious modifications to the Clean Air Act in more than a decade, were scheduled to go into effect this week. But the ruling by a three-judge panel of the U.S. District Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C., temporarily blocked implementation of a key portion of the regulatory plan.

Environmentalists hailed the decision, calling it a necessary step to stop White House efforts that they contend will relax air pollution controls at thousands of power plants and factories nationwide.

"The administration's rule change would allow industry to renovate facilities in ways that dramatically increase air pollution without installing up-to-date pollution controls or even notifying nearby residents," said Keri Powell, an attorney for Oakland-based Earthjustice, a plaintiff in the case.

In their decision, the judges blocked changes to a key provision of the "new source review" program, an element of the Clean Air Act intended to achieve pollution reductions as businesses grow.

The Bush administration plan would make it easier for businesses to avoid installing new pollution controls by specifying how much "routine maintenance" a company could do without being required to modernize equipment. The revision would allow a utility, refinery or manufacturing plant to make repairs worth as much as 20% of the cost of replacing a major component before the upgrades are required.

Industry groups long have protested that the new source review program is too bureaucratic and creates uncertainty over emissions-control strategies.

The Environmental Protection Agency agreed, saying the program slows upgrades at manufacturing plants, oil refineries and electrical generating stations, resulting in lower efficiency and slower smog cleanup.

But the judges ruled that "irreparable harm" could arise if the proposal were to go into effect, and that there was a "likelihood of success on the merits" in the case.

While environmentalists said the decision bolstered their hope that the revised rules may ultimately be overturned, the matter won't be decided until the court has tried the case, a process that could last months.

Several major environmental organizations joined with New York and 11 other states in filing the lawsuit. They contend that the rule changes drafted by the EPA are not as protective as measures already on the books, and would lead to more emissions linked to respiratory ailments and poor visibility.

Immediately upon taking office, Vice President Dick Cheney's energy policy task force proposed changes to the new source review program. The Clinton administration previously had explored ways to overhaul the program.

"There is agreement among the states, industry and the EPA that new source review needs to be reformed, but unfortunately the parties over the years haven't been able to come together and find solutions that work for everyone," said Jeffrey Marks, director of the air quality program for the National Assn. of Manufacturers.

EPA officials could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Something in the air

By Shari Roan, Los AngelesTimes Staff Writer - 12-29-03

A federally funded study will probe the connection between airborne particles, which are thought to cause a stress reaction in cells, and heart damage.

Lungs probably aren't the only parts of your body that suffer from poor air quality. Your heart, too, may be damaged.

For several years doctors have noticed that cardiovascular disease deaths and hospital admissions increase when air quality is poor. They and other experts suspect that certain pollution components — called ultra-fine particles — may be the culprit.

A new federally funded study will attempt to prove their theory.

Researchers will monitor ultra-fine particles in air pollution on various days. Ultra-fine particles are produced primarily by engine combustion and are most concentrated in areas with heavy traffic and fresh tailpipe exhaust. (As they disperse, ultra-fine particles sometimes clump together to become large particles.) The researchers also will conduct medical tests on elderly people with existing heart disease on the same days.

Laboratory research has shown that ultra-fine particles are small enough to get into the bloodstream and, once there, can cause inflammation in cells.

"These particles gain access into the tissue of the lungs; then they are able to penetrate into the cells themselves," says Dr. Ralph Delfino, an epidemiologist at UC Irvine, who is helping to conduct the study. "In addition, they can go in through the blood vessel walls and get into the bloodstream."

After they reach the heart, the particles are thought to cause a stress reaction in cells, producing inflammation that contributes to heart disease, Delfino says. The particles also may cause blood clots.

The study, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, will include 72 participants, age 65 and older, who have heart disease and who live near freeways and other heavy traffic areas in Orange, Los Angeles and Riverside counties. Because they already have the disease, changes in their condition caused by air pollution should be easier to detect.

They'll be monitored for blood pressure, abnormal heartbeat patterns and changes in blood flow to the heart. To get the most accurate readings, the participants will wear monitoring devices that take measurements around-the-clock. Researchers also will take blood tests, looking for indications of the inflammation associated with heart disease.

Although the study can't prove conclusively that ultra-fine particles contribute to heart disease, it should be able to determine whether there's a correlation between high levels of the pollutants and cardiovascular health.

This type of study, known as epidemiology, should be considered when government officials enact air quality rules, Delfino says. Presently, air quality regulations focus more on measurements of gases in the air, such as ozone, and the concentration of larger particles.

"When the regulators get together to decide what to do, they have to take into consideration all kinds of research, including epidemiology," he says. "It tells you the impact of these pollutants on public health. You can study rats until you're blue in the face, but it doesn't tell you the effects on people."

Unregulated emissions are hard to monitor

About ultra-fine particles

Ultra-fine particles are produced primarily by engine combustion and, at a size of less than 100 nanometers, are easily absorbed into the bloodstream and cells.

Local and federal government agencies do not regulate emissions of these particles. That could be because scientists know less about their effect on human health than they do about the effects of other components of air pollution, such as larger particles and gases such as carbon monoxide and ozone, says Dr. Ralph Delfino.

Ultra-fine particles also would be harder to monitor and regulate because their concentration varies widely within an urban area. Larger particles tend to be more uniformly distributed.

Letters to the Editor

Better traffic flow

By Chris Golden, Clovis

(Published in the Fresno Bee - Saturday, December 27, 2003, 6:55 AM)

I'm writing in regard to your recent article about more officers on the streets to catch traffic violators such as speeders, drunken drivers and red-light runners. While I do see this as a problem in the Fresno and Clovis areas, I think the problem lies not so much with the drivers, but with traffic flow and the timing of street lights.

I believe the reason so many people speed and run lights is because they are sick of sitting at intersections every quarter of a mile. I take Shaw Avenue to get to work, and in the roughly 3-mile round trip, of the 10 intersections I go through, I hit at least five of those lights red, if not seven or eight. About the only way I can hit them all green is by speeding.

While traffic violators are a problem and need to be addressed and dealt with properly, an equally if not more pressing issue is the traffic flow and timing of the streetlights. By improving traffic flow, drivers would be happier and less likely to try to run lights and speed, and we would also help to improve air quality, because we wouldn't have cars sitting at intersections all the time just burning fuel and making more smog.

Letters to the Editor

'A new vision'

By Mike Rhodes, Fresno

(Published in the Fresno Bee - Saturday, December 27, 2003, 6:55 AM)

The Valley is out of compliance with air quality standards, and air authorities have voted unanimously to push back the clean-air deadline to 2010. They argue it is not possible for the Valley to meet the 2005 deadline because automobiles are one of the primary contributors to pollution. We are told (gasp!) that one of the ramifications of being designated as an "extreme" air pollution area is that we would lose \$2.2 billion in road-building funds.

There seems something wrong, almost Orwellian, in the local "air authorities'" analysis and doublespeak. They are telling us that cars are the biggest contributor to air pollution in the Valley, and we can't comply with federal air quality standards because of them. Then, they tell us that if we do not put off reaching air quality standards we will lose funding to build new roads that will bring more cars to the area, creating even more pollution.

These same officials, in the Dec. 19 Bee, argue that they know what is best for the Valley and we don't need any stinking outsiders (federal government) to come in here and help us clear up the air.

Perhaps the smog in our Valley has clouded our local air quality authorities' vision. Voluntary compliance is not working. We need a new vision that includes mass transit, bike paths and forcing business to comply with the law. It is a matter of life and breath.

Op-Ed

It's time to reclassify and set new fuel efficiency standards

Tri-Valley Herald - 12-29-03

RECLASSIFYING and setting new fuel efficiency standards for light trucks and sport utility vehicles should be easy, but you know it won't be.

Start tampering with the oil and auto industries, unions and Americans' private chariots and you can count on deliberations being long, convoluted, heavy and emotional. Frankly, there's no guarantee new federal mileage requirements and a streamlined vehicle classification system will come out of the process initiated by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, but it should.

We're overdue for change. SUVs are passenger vehicles and ought to be reclassified as such. Two-door pickups with truck beds are, on the other hand, light trucks. And, mileage expectations for all vehicles used as personal transportation by John Q. and Joan Public should be improved.

But the Fords, Daimler-Chryslers, GMs, Hondas and Toyotas of this world aren't apt to do much about it without a little -- sometimes not so gentle -- persuasion from Mr. and Mrs. Public and government regulators. That's the way it seems to work.

The NHTSA notes that the vehicles Americans drive have changed and that current fuel efficiency standards are outdated, particularly when it comes to SUVs. They're wrongly classified as light trucks, meaning they're subject to less stringent fuel efficiency standards than other passenger vehicles.

Even when new mileage standards for light trucks are fully implemented in 2007, SUVs will get 5 mpg less than automobiles. While the CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) for cars is 27.5 mpg, the mean for SUVs is now 20.7, en route to 22.2 in four years. The gap must be narrowed.

One approach the NHTSA wants feedback on is reclassifying vehicles by weight. The positive side is that such a recasting could be used to impose mpg goals on the heaviest SUVs -- the Hummer H2, Ford Excursion and Chevrolet Suburban -- for the first time. They're not required to meet any mileage standards now, but should be.

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta says the goal is to "save more fuel, increase passenger safety and protect American jobs." To the League of Conservation Voters that means SUVs, light trucks and cars should all be required to get better mileage.

The Transportation Department says, however, that it doesn't want to make trucks lighter because that would make them less safe. To not do so, however, means they get worse mileage and emit more pollutants than cars.

All of which has suspicious environmentalists fearing that the Bush administration agenda is to manipulate fuel economy standards to benefit presidential pals in the auto and oil industries. A Sierra Club spokesman called the process "a giant Christmas gift for polluters."

Fuel efficiency standards need to be practical, but they also should be improved to push the technological envelope.

Manufacturers have skirted more demanding fuel efficiency standards applied to automobiles by developing an everyday, passenger version of the truck -- the SUV. It's time to close that loophole and make all vehicles used primarily as personal transportation subject to more demanding, but realistic, fuel efficiency standards.

If it is to succeed, however, many toes may end up wearing treadmarks.

[Op-Ed](#)

Let's talk

The serious issues that face California need serious debate.

(Published in the Tri-Valley Herald - Sunday, December 28, 2003, 7:00 AM)

By any standard, 2003 was a tumultuous year for California. And it is clear that the state and its citizens will face a broad array of challenges in 2004.

It seems equally clear that business-as-usual will not suffice to meet those challenges. It's time to consider some different approaches, to talk about some ideas that are not now part of the state's public discussion.

Frankly, we're not sure that all of these are good ideas. We may decide they're not -- California may decide they're not. But let's have the debate first.

Tuition at state universities

California's budget crunch will force the state to reduce its support next year for the University of California and California State University. That makes this the right time to ask why taxpayers are

deeply subsidizing the education of undergraduates and professional and graduate students who can afford to pay for their own education. For decades California has fulfilled its promise of access to higher education for all who qualify by holding university fees well below the level charged by comparable public institutions or private universities around the country. It has deeply subsidized all students with taxpayer dollars, regardless of their ability to pay.

The state can't afford to do that anymore. It should set tuition for UC and CSU at market levels and use state tax dollars to give financial aid to students based on their need. That way, the promise of access could still be assured; every student admitted would receive enough assistance to attend UC and CSU.

Equally important, the quality of the state's universities would be protected; the state would cut spending, not by reducing the number of professors and classes, but by reducing the tuition subsidy that now goes to high-income families and professional students who don't need taxpayer assistance to pay for college.

Universal preschool

California has new and rigorous academic standards for public school children, among the highest in the nation. But these high aspirations ring hollow when so many students -- perhaps as many as half -- start school without even the most basic skills they'll need to succeed. Just ask their kindergarten teachers. It's time for this state to catch up with others around the country that have established part-day, voluntary "universal preschool" for 3- and 4-year-olds. Such programs aren't cheap. But solid research has shown a big return on investment -- in lower rates of grade retention, dropouts, special education, welfare dependency and crime, and in higher college attendance and earnings -- for communities that invest in high-quality preschool programs. It's the smart thing to do.

Quality education model

It defies logic that California still doesn't know how much it costs to educate its children to the impressive academic standards the state has set for them. But here we are, on the threshold of 2004, without a solid answer to that question.

That's why it's so important that the work of the Quality Education Commission, which over the next year will try to put a price on a decent education, not end up on the same dusty shelf to which so many other efforts have been consigned.

What the commission will recommend remains unknown -- it may be a completely new allocation formula, it may be higher spending, or perhaps a more effective allocation of existing funds. There are too many corners of this state where schools are struggling. Their best hope of improvement may lie in this commission work -- if only the right people pay close attention.

Teacher quality

How can California ever expect its poorest children to meet high standards if it doesn't give them effective, experienced teachers? Those teachers are the most important ingredient if schools are to provide true opportunity in low-income neighborhoods. Yet those are the same neighborhoods where we send its least experienced -- often uncredentialed -- teachers.

The state has to get serious about making those schools more attractive to the most capable teachers. That includes not just pay incentives but the resources to improve working conditions at struggling schools. It also includes more meaningful pay differentials for teachers with subject matter expertise in shortage areas, such as science, math and special education. And it means putting an end to union contract agreements that encourage more senior teachers to opt out of challenging schools in favor of more comfortable jobs in the suburbs.

Raise the gas tax

The price of gasoline includes a state tax of 18 cents a gallon. That tax is as low as the benefits of raising it are high. This tax now generates more than \$3 billion a year. Doubling the tax (even if it is done in easier-to-swallow increments over time) would double that revenue, to more than \$6 billion a year. No tax is popular, but the vehicle license fee was much-loathed because it

represented a large financial pill to swallow during scattered times of the year. The gas tax comes in small, manageable doses every visit to the pump.

It is a proportional tax: the motorist who uses the roads more or drives a less efficient vehicle, uses more fuel and thus pays more tax. That encourages fuel efficiency, carpooling and fewer trips overall. Even a doubling of this tax amounts to putting a small dent into the unmet needs of California's sprawling development patterns, needs that range from undersized and poorly maintained roadways to insufficient transit.

Make CEQA smarter

The California Environmental Quality Act has been turned on its head, becoming a full employment act for lawyers and their client neighborhood groups. They tend to object to the most environmentally benign kind of housing -- that inside an existing community, particularly compact housing (town homes and apartments). Frequently, CEQA provides the only hook to stop a project: the bogus allegation that the developer and the local government did not provide enough paperwork to analyze traffic impacts.

The result is that CEQA has become not a protector of the environment, but a promoter of sprawl, pushing the housing market away from existing neighborhoods and onto farmland, where the cows don't sue. The solution: exempt "infill" housing projects (at least for those with a compact design that makes the most of the available land) from CEQA. Sprawl creates the traffic to worry about, the longer commutes that are less suitable for transit. A smarter CEQA creates smarter development patterns.

Water like the old days

If the state is to have any role in building additional reservoir projects (several are in the planning stages), model the funding after the State Water Project. Hatched during the glory years of infrastructure development, the water project first identified the customers, who agreed to pay the cost to develop and deliver the water. The state came up with the funds (by selling bonds) and the customers paid the money back under favorable terms (over 50 years). This is very different from the pure-pork form of modern water financing. Recent state bonds have been high on subsidies in the form of grants to local water districts for their projects and low on loans. No water legislation deserves a drop of ink or a legislative vote until customers have stepped forward to pay the full price of new reservoir water.