

Special panel created to address air pollution

By Lesli A. Maxwell, Fresno Bee Capitol Bureau, January 7, 2003

Senate President John Burton on Monday agreed to create a special committee in the Legislature's upper house to deal with the Central Valley's escalating air pollution.

Burton, a San Francisco Democrat, named Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, chairman of the new panel -- called the Senate Select Committee on Air Quality in the Central Valley.

Florez, who plans to introduce a package of air-related bills this legislative session, asked Burton last week to set up the committee.

"We need to put pressure on ourselves to do something," Florez said. "This [committee] will be the venue to start challenging some of the long-held assumptions about what's causing our air problem and how we can start to fix it. We might make a lot of people mad, but we've got to do something."

The eight-county San Joaquin Valley is one of the nation's dirtiest and unhealthiest air basins. Local air officials are up against a 2005 federal deadline to reduce smog in the Valley or face sanctions that include millions of dollars in fines, business penalties and the delay of \$2 billion in road-building funds.

Florez said he wants to start debate on whether more state regulation should be part of the solution, including banning long-term practices such as allowing farmers to burn crop waste in open fields.

For decades, state air regulators have allowed farmers to burn their vineyard prunings and orchard cuttings in open fields because it is the cheapest way for growers to get rid of crop waste.

"A lot of the problem has been exemptions [from air pollution regulations]," Florez said. "Thirty years ago, we thought we could pollute our way to prosperity, and now we can see that paradigm has not worked."

Florez said he will draft legislation that would impose limits on open-field burning, as well as bills dealing with fireplaces and tighter air pollution controls at dairies.

Sen. Chuck Poochigian, R-Fresno, expressed skepticism over whether the committee would generate substantive proposals that are even-handed.

"Obviously, the concern about air quality and the vital public health issues are quite legitimate," Poochigian said. "But we already have a very strong, extensive and powerful bureaucracy that operates in this subject area. ... What a committee like this could achieve remains to be seen."

Despite his reservations, Poochigian said he would be willing to serve on the committee.

"I'm not averse to any assignment ... but this shouldn't be driven by anyone's particular agenda," he said.

State and local air officials initially were receptive to having a legislative panel devoted to Valley air issues.

"The more people who get involved with solutions, the better," said Josette Merced Bello, spokeswoman for San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Said Richard Varenchik, spokesman for California Air Resources Board: "We'll work with the Senate in any way we can to help improve air in the San Joaquin Valley. Hopefully, this committee will help find solutions for some of the air problems."

Florez plans to hold hearings throughout the Central Valley over the next year, starting with one in the Capitol next month.

Florez, Fresno council tackle Valley pollution

Fresno debates today whether to ban log-burning fireplaces.

By Barbara Anderson, The Fresno Bee, *January 7, 2003*

For a fifth day since the beginning of this year, sooty air made it unhealthy to breathe in the San Joaquin Valley as unrelenting fog trapped tiny pieces of fireplace ash and exhaust particles close to the ground.

The chronic wintertime air pollution problem -- and what role residential wood burning plays in smoke-filled skies -- surfaced on today's Fresno City Council agenda.

Incoming City Council Member Henry T. Perea pledged to make residential wood burning his first order of business. On the council agenda: his request that the city attorney draft an ordinance banning log-burning fireplaces in new housing developments in favor of gas-burning fireplaces.

"We need to start thinking out of the box and really become aggressive," Perea said.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District stopped short of asking people not to burn wood in fireplaces and wood stoves tonight, but residents are asked not to burn until after 3 p.m. today.

Farmers are not allowed to burn agricultural cuttings today.

Valley air pollution officials warned children, the elderly and people with chronic heart and lung diseases to limit their time outdoors as today's air quality index in the Fresno region is expected to reach 147. A level of 101 to 150 is dangerous for children, asthmatics and other sensitive groups. A level above 150 is unhealthful for everyone.

The main pollutant source: microscopic particles 1/28th the diameter of a hair -- small enough to be inhaled and lodged into the lungs.

Perea said he is passionate about air quality in Fresno and made the issue part of his campaign. Fresno's high rate of asthma worries him. One out of six children has the lung disease -- the highest rate in the state.

Son of former City Council President Henry Perea, the younger Perea said: "I started using an [asthma] inhaler about three years ago."

The building industry supports the concept of an ordinance, Perea said. "The builders understand that we all have to do our part to make the air quality better."

Jeff Roberts, a planner for Granville Homes, said offering homes with gas fireplaces is one way builders can participate in cleaning up the air. "Every day, we're reading about air-quality issues ... and this is one way we can actually help, so we will be supportive."

Perea said he's confident the City Council will back his idea.

But Council Member Jerry Duncan questions spending an estimated \$5,000 to write an ordinance that would be unnecessary once the Valley air district implements a regional wood-burning rule of its own this year.

The air district wants to limit the number of fireplaces or wood stoves to one per acre of housing, require home sellers to replace or dismantle wood-burning stoves or inserts and restrict residential wood burning on polluted winter nights. Homes with wood as the only source of heat would be exempt. Public hearings on the proposal will continue in February.

"I don't know if a city ordinance would do anything," Duncan said. "And given our budget, we cannot afford the city attorney spending time writing something we don't need."

The air district is supportive of Perea's ordinance, said Charlie Goldberg, an agency spokesman.

"We think that anything that would limit emissions is a good idea, and even if our rule has similar goals, it is a show of support by the city for reducing wintertime emissions," he said.

The fireplace ordinance is set for a 3:15 discussion today before the City Council. If the council directs staff members to write an ordinance banning new fireplaces, it then will return to the public for a hearing and a vote.

The reporter can be reached at banderson@fresnobee.com <<mailto:banderson@fresnobee.com>> or 441-6310.

New board leader Sieglock takes chairman oath

By Eric Firpo, Record Staff Writer, January 7, 2003

Lodi's Jack Sieglock was sworn in Monday as chairman of the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors in a feel-good ceremony in which graciousness and humor replaced partisan politics.

An overflow crowd of more than 200 filled every seat in the board chamber, lined each wall and spilled into the hallway, and afterward was treated to catered food at an open reception amid the desks of the board clerks' office.

Sieglock and Supervisor Dario Marengo, both of whom won new terms in March, took their oaths of office. Then Sieglock took over as chairman, a post that gives him the power to set the board's agenda. Supervisor Leroy Ornellas will be vice chairman this year.

Supervisors earn \$61,248 a year, with the chairman making \$68,616, 12 percent more.

Once, the day of selecting new officers for the board was one filled with political rancor, deal-making and intrigue.

In 1999 and again in 2000, Supervisor Dario Marengo was snubbed for the chairmanship as three of his more-conservative colleagues elected one of their own on 3-2 votes.

But Supervisor Steve Gutierrez last year suggested politics and suspense be removed from the process, and the board voted to rotate the chair numerically by district. Third District Supervisor Victor Mow was replaced as chairman Monday by Sieglock, who represents the 4th District.

Mow reminded the crowd Monday that the result of Gutierrez's suggestion was that Gutierrez missed out on being chairman last year.

"It was a magnanimous gesture on his part, and I think the county is better for it," Mow said.

And though all were aware the conservative Sieglock is leading a board that tilts toward liberalism, Monday was a day supervisors put aside their differences.

"Much has been made of the philosophical split on this board," Mow said. "Reasonable and rational people disagree in a free society. And that's all right."

Mow left his seat on a humorous note, however. He said a kitten brought into the office by his aide Margaret Sanderson was adopted recently by someone in the county counsel's office.

The new owner named the kitten Chairman Meow.

"All I can say is, long live Chairman Meow," he said before stepping down.

Sieglock took over and praised his predecessor. He thanked his wife, children and parents, who were sitting in the front row of the audience. He thanked his supporters and the voters who elected him.

He warned that it will be a tough year given the state's brutal budget deficit. He said public safety will be one of his priorities, as will jobs, finding a new water supplies and providing services to those who need them.

Sieglock said he entered politics as an idealist who believes people can change things to fit their vision.

"I still believe that," he said.

Application withdrawn for fourth Tracy power plant

By Kate Fowlie, Record Staff Writer, January 7, 2003

TRACY -- Plans for a fourth power plant in the Tracy area have been called off, much to the delight of city officials and residents opposed to the facility.

Sacramento-based Wellhead Electric has withdrawn its application to build a 49-megawatt natural-gas-fired facility on Lammers and Valpico roads, said Chandler Martin of the San Joaquin County Community Development Department.

Martin said he received a message from Wellhead officials Dec. 19 announcing their decision, which came about a week after the [San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District sent a letter to the county recommending more studies on the plants' cumulative environmental effects.](#)

Wellhead representatives could not be reached for comment Monday.

The withdrawal was good news to Tracy residents and city officials who opposed what would have been the fourth power plant in an eight-mile radius. One small facility is under construction on the edge of town; two much larger plants are in the works. Tracy Mayor Dan Bilbrey said he worried about the plants' cumulative effects on air quality and was pleased with Wellhead's decision.

"A fourth was a bit much. I am glad to see that they are not moving ahead," Bilbrey said.

The Tracy City Council approved a resolution against Wellhead's plant last month but had no authority over the project because of its location in the unincorporated area of the county.

The county has the power to approve facilities up to 50 megawatts, and the California Energy Commission handles plants that produce more than 50 megawatts.

Wellhead had preliminary approval from the county to build the plant but did not obtain a building permit within the 18-month time limit. The approval was scheduled to expire Oct. 28, but Wellhead reappeared to apply for a one-year extension, only to withdraw the application later.

Economics most likely played a role in Wellhead's decision. In a November interview, Wellhead spokesman Gary Franzen said his company was waiting for a contract to provide energy to the state before deciding whether to build the Tracy plant.

Community activist Bob Sarvey, who has rallied residents against all four plants, said he was pleased but still worries.

"I feel cautious. These people have gone away once before. I am just going to keep tabs on them," Sarvey said.

Though small, the Wellhead plant would have been next to GWF's Tracy Peaker Power Project, a 169-megawatt natural-gas-fired facility under construction on South Schulte Road expected to be on line in April.

Both were designed to generate power during peak demand periods.

The other two proposed power facilities are Calpine's 1,100-megawatt East Altamont Energy Center and FPL's 1,120-megawatt Tesla Power Plant. Both are planned between Tracy and Livermore in Alameda County but close to the San Joaquin County line. Their location raises concern because the wind blows predominantly east and would carry the majority of the pollution toward Tracy.

At the earliest, the plants would be on line in 2005. East Altamont is awaiting final approval from the Energy Commission, which could happen in the next few months.

Tesla is still under review and could be delayed by the company itself for financial reasons.

Visalia Times-Delta, Saturday, Jan. 4, 2003

In the corrections section on Page 2A

Due to a reporter's error, a story that ran Dec. 17 on page 3A of the Times-Delta, misquoted a source. Kelly Malay, a spokeswoman with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, should have been quoted as saying, "[Air quality] is a very serious problem — we don't want to mislead anyone about the seriousness of it. But there could be a light at the end of the tunnel."

Officials again urge limit on fireplace use

The Bakersfield Californian, Sunday January 05, 2003, 09:13:05 PM

Air-pollution officials have declared another "Please Don't Light Tonight" alert, urging people to limit the use of their fireplace or wood stove up to this afternoon.

Officials also have canceled agricultural burning on the valley floor until further notice.

People who must light up are asked to: use only gas inserts or Environmental Protection Agency-certified wood and pellet stoves; burn only clean, dry, seasoned wood and not trash, newspapers and magazines; choose manufactured fireplace logs instead of wood; give the fire a generous air supply; and build small, hot fires instead of large smoldering ones.

News in brief from the San Joaquin Valley

The Associated Press , printed in the Bakersfield Californian, Monday January 06, 2003, 09:50:05 AM

MERCED, Calif. (AP) - A proposal by regional air quality regulators to ban wood-burning fireplaces and stoves in new homes won't affect some builders in two San Joaquin Valley counties.

"Most of the builders we represent are already using gas logs," said Ed Taczanowsky, vice president of the Building Industry Association of the Central Valley. The association represents builders in Merced and Stanislaus counties.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is considering the wood fireplace ban to help control air pollution in the valley, which has some of the dirtiest air in the nation.

Lori Rossi, a Merced real estate agent, said if the proposal is approved, she doesn't expect it to have a negative effect on Merced's housing market.

"Some people prefer gas because of the convenience of not having to deal with firewood," she said.

Bakersfield Californian, Digest for Jan. 7

Florez will head new committee on air quality in Sacramento

Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, will chair a new air quality committee focused on pollution in the valley.

The senator's office announced Monday that the new committee will study the health problems reportedly caused by air pollution.

Florez asked the Senate president pro tempore to form such a committee last week, according to a statement from his office.

Florez will discuss the committee more during a meeting at 2 p.m. today in front of 1800 30th St. in Bakersfield.

Group offering grants for ideas to clean up air

The Bakersfield Californian, Monday January 06, 2003, 10:43:49 PM

A new grant application process for pollution-control projects was announced Monday by Valley Clean Air Now, the industry-backed nonprofit that has vowed to help clean up the San Joaquin Valley's filthy air.

The group, based in Fresno, announced its formation in November. Though its board of directors consists of major developers and industries, the group promised to encourage innovative valleywide pollution solutions and not to fight government regulations.

One of the corporations on its board, oil giant ChevronTexaco, gave the group its startup funding of \$2 million.

Some of that money will be available to individuals and organizations that can come up with winning pollution-fighting ideas.

Clean Air Now is looking for "innovative approaches and demonstration projects" that will foster the group's mission.

That mission is to educate the public about the need to take personal responsibility for reducing air pollution; promote voluntary actions to reduce air pollution; initiate and publicize creative new approaches; and sponsor pilot programs and educational efforts to provide solutions for high-emissions sources.

Grant application forms and information about the group can be found on the Internet at www.valley-can.org.

For more information, call Brad Sherwood at (916) 325-2908 or Shelley Cousineau at (559) 438-2040.

[Visalia Times-Delta Editorial, Originally published Monday, January 6, 2003](#)

Turn over new leaf for new year: Plant some trees

Trees are taken a little less for granted here in the San Joaquin Valley, thank goodness, because we need all you can get.

Here's a deal for the new year that's tough to beat: Join the National Arbor Day Foundation for \$10 and get five trees free.

Think about it: Five more trees in the Valley to provide shade, produce oxygen, clean our air, provide a home for birds and give our city an attractive landscape. It's difficult to come up with a more significant environmental initiative. Planting new trees helps the community in so many ways.

The National Arbor Day Foundation will ship five crepe myrtles to members who join the foundation in January. The foundation selected crepe myrtles for the attractiveness in landscaping. They will be shipped at the right time for planting between Feb. 1 and May 31, with complete instructions. Those who join the foundation also receive a subscription to its bimonthly publication, "Arbor Day," and "The Tree Book."

In fact, the National Arbor Day Foundation has all kinds of opportunities to obtain free trees and shrubs through membership or other programs.

Getting trees for landscaping for free is an attractive incentive. But joining this and organizations like it benefit our community in other ways. Participation raises our consciousness about the

environment, air quality and stewardship of our resources. It's about more than getting a good deal. It's also about doing a good deed.

Trees. Such a deal.

[Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee, January 7, 2003](#)

Clean air credit?

By Robert Jones
Fresno

After pruning my 120 acres of almonds heavily this year it took me two days to burn the prunings.

Will the Sierra Club, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution District and the general public give me 363 days of credit for my trees, more than 10,000 producing clean oxygen for the Valley air? I think not.

Air solutions

By Gerald Kroeker
Fresno

Possible solutions to solve air pollution:

Where possible, have neighbors place garbage cans on the property line -- half as many stops and starts for garbage trucks.

Leaf blowers should be used only for blowing leaves on lawns, not flower beds and not to sweep the walk or driveway.

Parking lot sweepers should not be allowed to use blowers. This blows auto soot and brake material into the air.

Remove all speed bumps.

Reduce speed limits in metropolitan Fresno to 25 mph in residential areas and to 35 mph or less if safer on main four-lane streets. Main streets every half mile convert to one-way streets.

Spend monorail study money on a common sense transportation system.

No new diesel or gasoline buses. Use either natural gas or electric buses. Use smaller buses with connecting routes east, west, north and south.

No new freeways in the Valley, especially a new east-side freeway.

Same smog requirements for old and new vehicles, except antique and classic autos used only in shows.

If a new car has a defective transmission or tire, who is to say a new car can't have a defective smog equipment? Some 1- to 2-year-old cars travel 100,000 miles in one or two years. Include state, county and federal cars in smog inspections.

'Move the tracks'

By Tom Bailey
Vice President, Media and Public Relations, Fresno Area Residents for Rail Consolidation

If we are really serious about improving the quality of our air here in the Valley, the consolidation of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe tracks alongside the Union Pacific tracks along Highway 99 needs to happen now.

On average, 80,000 cars sit idling each and every day for an average of four minutes each while waiting for the 60-plus trains that transit our city daily.

The math is easy: That's 6,000 hours of daily unwanted and unnecessary air pollution. It's time to move the tracks.

Do it now

By Anne Mosgrove
Fresno

Many thanks to The Bee for having raised community awareness and discussion of air pollution to unparalleled heights through the "Last Gasp" special report, continuing coverage of the issue and the request for ideas. Here are mine.

Redirect transportation spending now.

In recent editorials The Bee has emphasized the importance of extending Measure C, the countywide half-cent sales tax for transportation projects, but we have a more urgent issue.

The current Measure C doesn't expire until 2007. In the following three-year period of 2008 through 2010, we can average no more than one violation annually of the one-hour ozone standard under the "extreme" nonattainment designation.

Between now and then, transportation spending in Fresno County from Measure C, state and federal sources will exceed \$750 million. Most of that spending is controlled by local politicians on the Council of Fresno County Governments and the Fresno County Transportation Authority, including every mayor in the county, several city council members from Fresno and Clovis, and two county supervisors.

Continued focus on a Measure C extension lets these local politicians and their transportation planning staffs off the hook completely by failing to call for immediate action.

For Measure C to have any hope of existence beyond 2007 and for us to have the slightest chance of having no more than four violations of the one-hour ozone standard in 2008, local transportation spending priorities must change dramatically -- now.

Measure C backers, including The Bee, must demand that the money be used to fulfill the tax's heretofore-failed promise of cleaner air.

[Letters to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian, January 7, 2003:](#)

Group cares about air

In your unfortunately headlined Nov. 15 article, "New clean air group called business sham," some critics of Clean Air Now (CAN), such as the Sierra Club, claimed speciously that our goal is to partake in political activities related to air quality regulations and to "mollify the public." This claim not only is completely false, but also reveals the critics' own narrow agenda for our valley.

Clean Air Now is a 501c(3) charitable non-profit organization. Had the critics done even rudimentary homework, that means we are restricted from partaking in any kind of political activities.

CAN is not about lawsuits, regulations and never-ending finger pointing. It is about individual local leaders taking action at a time when it is needed the most -- now. Our goal is to promote and fund some creative, real-world solutions to the air pollution crisis in the San Joaquin Valley and to engage everyone in the process. Our board, which will continue to expand, represents a cross section of valley people who are ready to step up and get personally involved.

Actions speak louder than words. CAN is committed to advancing innovative approaches to making the San Joaquin Valley a healthier place to live. A year from now, judge us by what we have done to advance the cause of cleaner air.

BOB MADDUX, President, Valley Clean Air Now, Fresno