

Perea joins blaze inquiry

Former council member in charge of report on fire.

By Pablo Lopez, The Fresno Bee, February 4, 2003

Fresno Mayor Alan Autry added some political muscle to the city's task force investigating the smoky debris fire at Archie Crippen Excavation, naming former Council President Henry Perea as the point man.

"It's a perfect match," Deputy Mayor Roger Montero, co-chairman of the task force, said Monday. "Henry knows his way around City Hall, and he knows there are no sacred cows. We want a full accounting."

Perea, who left office last month because of term limits, is the spokesman for the task force and is in charge of writing a detailed report on the Crippen fire, Montero said.

The mayor will announce the names of other task force members this week.

The unit's mission is to determine whether city policies and lack of code enforcement contributed to the fire. If the city is to blame, members will make recommendations on how to prevent similar fires, Montero said.

The mayor also has asked the task force to investigate why the city put recycling and demolition operations, such as Crippen's, mainly in southwest Fresno, which is home to many minorities.

"This could be very telling," Montero said.

In addition, Autry wants to know why the blaze caught firefighters by surprise and whether the city notified the public in a timely manner about the fire's dangers.

Perea said he is looking forward to "serving at the direction of co-chairs Roger Montero and Council Member Cynthia Sterling," whose district encompasses southwest Fresno.

He said the fire intrigues him because it has dealt a devastating blow to air quality and to people's health. As a council member, improving air quality was one of Perea's priorities. The American Lung Association gave him a California Clean Air award last year.

The mayor has promised task force members that they will have "total access to city data, research and information," Montero said.

Perea, who has a master's degree in public administration from the University of Southern California, spent six years on the City Council. Before that, he was on the Fresno County Board of Education for 51/2 years. He works as personnel director for classified employees at Sanger Unified School District.

A former reserve Fresno police officer, Perea said he has experience interviewing people and investigating. Montero and Sterling would like the report completed by late March.

The fire on Crippen's property, at Marks and Nielsen avenues, has been burning since Jan. 11.

The cost, so far, to put out the two-story pile of burning debris is estimated at more than \$1.8 million, said Lisa Fasano, spokeswoman for the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

The city's share, so far, is about \$374,640, Fasano said. The EPA has the largest share at \$694,090.

Firefighters estimate the fire will be out in seven days, she said.

Firefighters worked Monday on a portion of the pile that is 30 feet high and "burning from the top to the bottom," Fresno Battalion Chief Tim Henry said.

In some spots, the fire has been as hot as 1,000 degrees, officials said.

Firefighters believe spontaneous combustion caused the fire, which is burning a mixture of concrete, asphalt, wood, metal, plastics, auto parts and other material.

Smoke from the fire has wafted throughout the area, triggering health problems citywide. Firefighters are using a mixture of water and foam to contain the dirty emissions, Fasano said. "The emissions have reduced significantly since the fire started," she said.

At any given time, 75 to 100 people, from local, state and federal agencies, are working at the fire site. Twelve Fresno city firefighters continue to battle the blaze during daylight hours, and six remain overnight.

After the fire is put out, authorities plan to do a thorough investigation to confirm the cause of the fire.

[The Bakersfield Californian Editorial, February 03, 2003:](#)

Important air meetings

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, has been named to head a select committee on air quality in the Central Valley to study the growing pollution problem and develop potential solutions. Legislative committee members say they want to hear from the public. Hearings have been scheduled throughout the valley. They will begin at 10 a.m.

* "Health effects of Central Valley Air Pollution," Feb. 5, State Capitol.

* "The Cost of Missing Federal Control Guidelines," Feb. 28, Air Pollution Control District headquarters, Fresno.

* "The Agricultural Industry and Central Valley," March 7, Bakersfield Ag Pavilion.

* "Valley Residents' Role in Curbing Air Pollution, April 4, Visalia County Administration building.

* "Truck and Vehicle Air Emissions," April 17, Hanford County Administration building.

* "Dairies Growth and Its Effects on Central Valley," May 2, Shafter City Hall.

* "Respiratory Illnesses," May 16, Fresno County Administration building.

* "The Federal 2005 Deadlines: Are We Prepared?" June 6, Stockton City Hall.

* "Manufacturing, Processing Plants and Refineries," July 11, Merced City Hall.

* "Valley Population Growth and Its Relation to Central Valley Air Pollution," Aug. 1, Lodi City Hall.

* "Does Smog Check II Work?" Sept. 19, Modesto City Hall.

* "Cows or Cars: The Future of Air Emissions," Oct. 3, Fresno Farm Bureau.

* Report to the Legislature, Jan 5, 2004.

[The Bakersfield Californian Editorial, February 03, 2003:](#)

Huh? We can't hear you

Those pesky citizens. They just get in the way of government. They just don't know their place and, annoyingly, think they can tell their elected officials what to do.

The saga of a Bakersfield woman who was named to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's citizens advisory committee illustrates the dilemma when a "citizen" mistakenly believes her advice is actually being sought.

Last week, *The Californian* reported Ann Williams, a retired Bakersfield High School English teacher, had quit the advisory committee. Williams was appointed by Kern County Supervisor Barbara Patrick to serve as a representative of the environmental community.

"I increasingly feel the citizens advisory committee has existed mostly to give the appearance of citizen involvement," Williams explained. "I'm not going to go anymore and plead for things that are not going to happen."

After serving for a year on the committee, Williams said she felt powerless to affect any improvement in the valley's unhealthy air and disillusioned by a political process that continues to allow polluters to pollute.

Responses to Williams' resignation clearly demonstrate the dilemma of elected officials who say they want citizens' advice, but don't:

Patrick Claiming Williams' misunderstood her role, the supervisor told *The Californian*, "The purpose of the group is to disseminate information back to the community. ... it is not their role to then pass judgment, if you will, on what the air district is doing and then make recommendations to our governing board."

Josette Merced Bello The district's spokeswoman explained citizens advisory committee members "work more hands-on with the staff than the governing board. Their function is more to provide input and guidance to the staff and make recommendations to the governing board."

The district's Web site Describes the duties of the citizens advisory committee as including "to facilitate public input into district programs and actions."

Lee Smith A Madera County attorney, who is chairman of the committee, said, "Lately we haven't provided the amount of input that we should. ... We're trying to make an effort to return to that role."

Ah, those pesky citizens. Ask them what they think and they just might tell you. And then what will you do?

To most average citizens, the valley air district is pretty much an insiders' club. The day-to-day exchanges are between a technical staff and industry representatives. They wage the battle to clean the valley's air of a stew of pollutants coming from a wide range of sources including the tailpipes of cars and the gases of industrial plants.

Every once in a while, they will come up for air and tell average citizens not to light their fireplaces or do some other pollution-purging thing.

Meetings of the district's decision-making board are conducted at various locations in the multicounty air basin. And while the locations are tied together by television hookups, few average citizens know about the meetings or care to attend.

That makes groups, such as the citizens advisory committee, so important. They should provide a conduit (a two-way street) for information to travel to and from the district's staff, board and citizens they are supposed to serve.

It's a shame Ann Williams was prompted to quit the citizens advisory committee.

It's a greater shame that their own words reveal district officials never seriously considered listening to what Williams and others like her had to say.

[Letter to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star, February 4, 2003:](#)

Be tolerant of farm noise, dust

Editor: This is a welcome to all the city folk who have moved to the San Joaquin Valley to enjoy "country life" and the affordable housing that it has to offer for them. This valley has an immensely rich agricultural base and provides food and fibre for most of America and much of the world. A great deal of U.S. food aid comes from this Valley.

As a wife and mother of agricultural applicators, by ground equipment and aircraft, including helicopters, I would like to remind all newcomers to this valley, that they must be tolerant of noise, dust and odors, pertaining to the production of food and fibre on the farms, ranches and dairies in this valley.

Everyone involved in agriculture works hard, long hours in all kinds of weather, often on holidays and Sundays, out of necessity, not choice.

Please be patient with agricultural equipment moving slowly along highways. Please be tolerant of the noisy aircraft flying over your neighbor's field. Do not interfere with these operations and stay indoors.

Please understand that helicopters and agricultural aircraft are very efficient at applying seed, fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides, accurately and quickly. The highly trained pilots in these aircraft are providing an essential service. These pilots have to fly close to the ground by necessity. They can be noisy but they try to avoid people, animals, buildings and power lines. Their lives depend on their judgment.

Please remember that agriculture, providing an abundance of quality food and fibre, is the most essential part of our freedom in America.

Sylvia Brigham
Delhi