

Easy cell: Clean-air cars make converts on tour

By MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer

The Bakersfield Californian

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The woman in the dirty red Chevy Blazer wasn't looking at the stoplight. She was pressed against her car window gawking at the shiny silver Honda FCX fuel cell car. Looking like a Volkswagen Rabbit on steroids, it was hard to miss.

As the cars waited at the light, the Blazer pumped a visible plume of poisonous gases into the already-polluted Bakersfield air. The Honda left only an invisible trail of water vapor. And it also pulled away from that light a lot quicker.

The Honda and five other fuel cell cars visited Bakersfield Thursday during "Rally Thru the Valley," a four-day caravan from Sacramento to Los Angeles. The event was organized by the California Fuel Cell Partnership, a group of automakers, energy companies and government agencies working together to push the technology forward.

Fuel cells use hydrogen to make electricity in an electrochemical process. That electricity then drives electric motors to move the car. The only byproducts are heat and water -- so slight that it rarely appears even as a vapor.

The technology has the potential to greatly reduce the nation's dependence on imported oil, and to sharply reduce air pollution, a vital benefit in smoggy places like Bakersfield. Motor vehicles today represent about one-third of the San Joaquin Valley's total smog problem, according to figures compiled by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

"The promise is there. It's our job to make that promise a reality," said Alan Lloyd, chairman of the California Air Resources Board, who joined the caravan. The board recently relaxed its long-standing mandate for battery-powered cars in favor of a new emphasis on fuel cells. Automakers long resisted the move to electric cars, but they appear to be flocking to fuel cells.

"They said battery technology won't work. This is a technology which gives us zero emissions and they say it will work," Lloyd said.

The public got a chance to ride in the fuel cell cars during the caravan's stop at the Kern County Museum on Thursday. Most emerged from their rides grinning and impressed.

Bakersfield resident Dwight Robertson said he's ready to buy a fuel cell car now. He also wants a standalone fuel cell to run a water pump on his farm outside town.

"It's a fun buggy to drive in," Robertson said after a spin in the Honda, which he found similar in power and comfort to the Nissan he drives now. "They say it's not available to the public yet, but I'd like to get my hands on some. We've got to do something because the pollution in this valley is terrible."

A few cars in the group were conversions of existing models, including Hyundai Santa Fe and Toyota Highlander SUVs, and a Ford Focus sedan. Others were a Nissan X-Trail, resembling a chiseled version of the present-day X-Terra SUV, and a Mercedes Necar, based on a small hatchback not sold in the United States. All these automakers expect to have a fuel cell car ready for market by 2010.

Because their basic powerplants are electric, they provide quick acceleration from a stop that flattens out above 30 mph or so. But they are capable of highway speeds, running 60 to 70 mph during the caravan. Only one breakdown occurred en route to Bakersfield: The Nissan had a computer problem.

One problem for now is the refueling infrastructure. Hydrogen stations are popping up around California, but they can be counted on two hands. Fortunately, hydrogen can be produced in a number of ways.

The ultimate answer is a solar-powered refueling station fitted to every home.

A solar panel that would fit on an average residential roof produces enough hydrogen from water to fill the Honda's tank every two to three days, said Honda engineer Shiro Matsuo.

Panel will consider tract along bluffs

By JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer
The Bakersfield Californian
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Another tract of homes in the northeast goes to the Bakersfield Planning Commission for approval tonight.

The tract, on the north side of Highway 178 just east of Alfred Harrell Highway, is the next in a string of recent projects now set for construction along the Kern River bluffs.

It would contain 361 homes tucked in between Kyle Carter Homes' developing Tuscan neighborhood and Highway 178 near Rio Bravo Country Club.

Now it is unclear whether the project will face the same opposition confronting other housing tracts on the bluffs.

City Planning Director Stan Grady said developers started bringing their maps to the city 12 months ago in anticipation of the opening of the new California Water Service treatment plant nearby.

Water from the plant is needed before thousands of new homes can be built in the dry northeast.

The projects, which already have the correct zoning, have reached the decision-making stage in a cluster.

All have gotten city approval despite Sierra Club arguments that the homes they generate will bring a flood of cars to the scenic bluffs and clog the air with smog and the area's rural roads with traffic.

Sierra Club representatives have responded by appealing two of the projects to the Bakersfield City Council and threatening a lawsuit on the one project the council approved over the club's objections.

The council unanimously overturned the second appeal and approved the project Wednesday night.

Grady said the residential zoning of the land was set a quarter-century ago, and the fact that the land is finally developing doesn't change the fact that homes are a good thing to put on the property.

He said Wednesday that the city had not received any opposition to approval of the tract from the Sierra Club.

Planners OK new tract of homes

By JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer
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Bakersfield planning commissioners approved a tract of 361 homes in northeast Bakersfield Thursday night.

The Sierra Club, continuing a fledgling campaign against development in the northeast, spoke out against the project's impacts on animals, air quality and traffic.

"We think a full-fledged EIR (environmental impact report) should be developed for this project," said Sierra Club representative Gordon Nipp.

The big items on his list of problems were air quality and traffic congestion produced by the Lucas Development project and a host of new home projects being planned around it.

"Some of the cumulative impacts of these projects are going to degrade our already abysmal air quality," he said.

Roads would be clogged as well.

"We suggest that there be a comprehensive traffic study performed on roads out there," Nipp said.

Representatives for Lucas Development of Newport Beach said the project has complied with all laws that govern development in the area.

"I think our project is a better project because of our need to respond to all the concerns of the community," said Lucas representative Dave Dmohowski.

But he said the Sierra Club's concerns about the impacts on air quality and traffic created by the flood of new development in the area have already been addressed city rules.

"The city of Bakersfield has completed the mother of all cumulative impact studies and that is your Metropolitan Bakersfield General Plan," Dmohowski told commissioners.

An update of the General Plan completed in December 2002 accepted that air quality and traffic will get worse in Bakersfield as a result of development.

City Council members and Kern County supervisors accepted that trade-off when they approved the update of the General Plan.

Planning commissioners reviewed the Sierra Club's concerns with city staff members and focused on concerns of their own -- namely if traffic from the Lucas development would be able to get out on to Highway 178 safely.

Commissioners approved the project unanimously with some safety revisions to the plan.

The tract map for the Lucas project is the third near the Kern River bluffs that has been challenged by the Sierra Club in the past few months.

Most of the arguments Nipp raised against the Lucas project were raised first against projects just to the south and northwest of the site. Sierra Club attorneys have filed a lawsuit against the city over a square mile of homes planned nearby -- northwest of the intersection of Highway 178 and Alfred Harrell Highway.

Nipp and Tom Carosella, one of the co-developers of that project, said they are discussing settlement terms.

"We're working on our differences," Carosella said. "It's possible for us to reach an agreement."

A second project by Sage Community Development at the corner of Highway 178 and Miramonte Drive was approved by the Bakersfield City Council Wednesday night. Nipp said the Sierra Club is still considering whether it will file a lawsuit protesting that approval.

He said the Sierra Club, with its actions, is determined to change the way the city looks at the impacts of growth on air quality and traffic.

"These issues have to be brought up a number of times," before things change, he said. Lucas Development now has two years to start the project.

Adjust fireplace rule

[Letter to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian](#)

May 16, 2003

Fireplaces and wood stoves are getting a bum rap in the valley. If the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has its way, people in the valley will unnecessarily lose their fireplace privileges on up to 30 nights of the year.

What a shame since the actual particulate matter contribution from fireplaces and wood stoves is minimal and the severity of the district's actions won't make a dent in solving the valley's real air quality problems.

It's time for the district to rethink its excessive fireplace regulation proposals and advocate for a curtailment program that limits the use of solid fuel fireplaces and stoves only on the worst air quality days during the winter months and provides incentives for the use of clean-burning technology and fuels.

Excessive regulations don't help resolve a problem that doesn't require radical controls. Inaccurately painting wood smoke as a major culprit does not do the valley's air justice. It's like giving a first-time shoplifter a life sentence while three-strike felons are getting work furlough programs -- and all with very limited evidence.

Regulations should be proportionate to the problem. We agree that improving air quality in this valley is an important priority for all who live here and we applaud the district's efforts to take on this very complicated problem.

We accept that a few nights during the winter, when climactic inversions exacerbate the build-up of all particulate pollution sources in the valley, people might have to refrain from use of fireplaces and wood stoves.

But these restrictions should only be called in communities where weather conditions create this problem and even then only on those few nights when wood burning truly contributes to an air quality problem.

CHRIS CARON, Vice President, Duraflame Inc., Stockton

Time to stand up Fresno City Council can send a clear message on cleaning up the air. [Fresno Bee editorial](#) (*Published Tuesday, May 20, 2003, 2:50 AM*)

The Fresno City Council will have a great opportunity today to put itself firmly on the record in favor of improving the Valley's dirty air. State Sen. Dean Florez will appear before the council this morning to ask for its official support for a package of bills Florez is pushing in the Legislature. The Florez bills, wide ranging as they are, represent only the first, minimal legislative efforts to make the air we breathe cleaner. Opposition has surfaced to some of the measures, particularly in the agricultural community, which regards pieces of the legislation as radical. They aren't the least bit radical, in fact, except from the perspective of special interests whose goal is to preserve the status quo. But when it comes to air quality, the status quo has become deadly. Bad air is responsible for asthma and other respiratory complaints becoming so pervasive in the Valley, especially among our children -- nearly one Valley child in six already suffers from asthma, and any delay or backsliding in the effort to clean up the air will only make that figure worse. A quick review of the Florez package: SB 700 would require farmers to obtain air pollution permits for diesel-powered irrigation pumps and for confined-animal feeding operations such as dairies by Jan. 1, 2005, and would require local air districts to adopt rules to reduce or eliminate air pollution caused by farming activities such as harvesting, tilling or discing. SB 701 would create low-interest loans to help farmers pay for new equipment or other measures to limit air pollution. SB 702 would expand an existing grant program that helps farmers replace or retrofit dirty, diesel-powered irrigation pumps and equipment such as tractors. SB 703 would revoke "standby" charges that ag customers must pay utilities to keep irrigation pumps connected to the electricity grid. That would reduce costs and should encourage farmers to use electricity rather than cheaper, but dirtier, diesel fuel. SB 704 would require biomass facilities to burn mostly agricultural

waste to produce electricity. SB 705 would ban open-field burning by June 1, 2005. SB 706 would prohibit wood-burning fireplaces in all new homes starting Jan. 1, except some that meet certain federal EPA standards. SB 707 would set up buffer zones between dairies and cities by blocking construction of new dairies within 3 miles of a urban areas and schools, and conversely, would prevent construction of schools or homes within 3 miles of existing dairies. SB 708 requires older cars and trucks to comply with state air emission standards through the Smog Check II program, but continues an exemption for vehicles more than 45 years old. SB 709 would add three public members with expertise in health, economics and the environment to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Board, appointed by the governor, the Senate Rules Committee and the Assembly speaker. The City Council is already talking about steps it can take to do its part in cleaning up the air -- free bus rides for city employees to and from work and free or reduced-rate parking passes for employees who carpool are two of the suggestions that have surfaced. That's great. The more creative the council can be -- and the more deeply involved -- the easier will be this enormously difficult task. This ought to be an easy choice for the council members. Clean air is not a partisan issue -- air pollution does not follow party affiliation or jurisdictional boundaries. We will all have to share the burden of cleaning it up -- and that's fair. But for elected officials, cleaning up the air is a test and a measure of leadership, the ability to look beyond the next election cycle and act with future generations in mind.

[Modesto Bee Editorial, May 20, 2003:](#)

No more hands-off for EPA and valley air

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has agreed to reverse a decade of delay-prone pursuit of clean air for the valley and to take over the effort from the local air district if an acceptable plan doesn't emerge in the next 14 months. That's good for those of us who breathe the valley's air.

EPA's agreement settles a lawsuit brought by environmental groups that were unhappy with a 10-year-old valley air plan that never measured up. The EPA never seemed interested in the plan's shortcomings-- until it was sued.

Now that's changed, or could next year. The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has until July 31, 2004, to complete an acceptable plan. It has a draft ready and expects to hold its first public hearing on the plan in mid-June. But environmentalists believe they've spotted flaws in the plan; that's why they embrace the EPA decision.

For its part, the local air district is happy because having EPA at the table may increase the odds of getting serious federal resources -- which will certainly be needed -- to address the valley's dirty air. And the EPA itself is pleased -- a spokesman said this agreement "gives the valley air district the chance to come up with a plan."

So there we are. Everyone seems happy. The proof, of course, is in the pudding, or in this case, in the details of the cleanup plan that's produced.

In the end, as important as these institutional forces will be in cleaning the air, it's really up to all of us. We all do our share to pollute and we'll all have to bear a share of the pain in cleaning the air.

