

City backs air board

Fresno Co. cannot reach consensus on bill to alter district

By Jim Davis

The Fresno Bee, Wednesday, May 4, 2005

The Fresno City Council on Tuesday voted to support a state Senate bill that would expand the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District board by giving permanent seats to the public and the three largest cities.

Fresno County supervisors could not reach a consensus on whether to sign a resolution in support of Senate Bill 999, so they decided to revisit the issue at their next meeting May 17.

The bill, sponsored by state Sen. Mike Machado, D-Linden, would make several changes to the air board, including expanding it from 11 to 17 members.

Valley cities would see the number of seats on the board increase from three to five. Machado's bill would provide a permanent seat to each of the Valley's three largest cities - Bakersfield, Stockton and Fresno.

The remaining two city seats would be shared on a rotating basis among cities smaller than 40,000 population and those larger than 40,000. In addition, the bill would add four other positions. One would have transportation or urban planning expertise, and the other would be an expert on the environmental effects of air pollution. Both would be appointed by the governor.

The third member would be appointed by the Assembly speaker and would represent the "environmental justice community." The fourth would be appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules and would be a doctor with "expertise regarding the health effects of air pollution."

City Council Member Tom Boyajian supported the bill, saying he thinks something needs to be done to improve the Valley's air quality.

"I don't know if this bill is going to clean our air, but something has to change," Boyajian said.

Council Member Jerry Duncan urged the council to oppose the resolution, because he was worried about the "very unique addition of four members of the so-called public."

"It's about putting some very extreme special interests in a position where they're going to hurt getting our air clean," Duncan said.

The council voted 4-2 to support the resolution. Council President Mike Dages, who brought the item to the council, and Council Members Boyajian, Cynthia Sterling and Brian Calhoun supported it. Council Members Duncan and Larry Westerlund opposed. Council Member Henry T. Perea was absent.

At the Hall of Records, Fresno County Supervisor Susan Anderson made a motion for the board to support the bill but recommend some changes to it. Supervisor Henry Perea agreed, but Supervisors Judy Case, Phil Larson and Bob Waterston would not support it.

Case, the board's chairwoman, said the air board has made some great strides in combating pollution in the Valley and she does not see why any more members are needed.

In other Fresno City Council business, council members rejected an appeal of a decision that allows a law firm to demolish a small downtown apartment building. The appeal was filed by historic preservationist Jeanette Jurkovich.

Law firm Perez, Williams and Medina is seeking to expand its offices at 1432 E. Divisadero St. and wants to demolish one of the buildings for parking.

The firm owns both of the identical Craftsman-style complexes, which were built between 1913 and 1914.

The downtown buildings are commonly referred to as W.P. Cutting Flats.

Padre Hotel project remains in limbo

Owner puts off renovation until legal matter over asbestos is resolved

By JAMES BURGER, Californian staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, May 4, 2005

The asbestos lawsuit against the owner of the Padre Hotel continues to stall renovation of the downtown Bakersfield landmark.

David Cooper, local attorney for Pacifica Enterprises, said the San Diego company doesn't want to move forward with construction until the lawsuit is resolved.

So, when is it going to be resolved?

That question is up in the air.

On Tuesday, a Kern County Superior Court judge set a trial date in October.

But the case could be resolved sooner, during a settlement hearing for the case on May 24.

Cooper said both sides in the suit seem ready to reach a settlement -- if not on May 24 -- then soon thereafter.

The Kern County District Attorney's Office filed the lawsuit against Pacifica nearly a year ago in mid-May 2004.

The lawsuit claims that Pacifica knowingly removed asbestos from the Padre without proper safety precautions, using unskilled laborers.

Officials from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District cited Pacifica for violations on more than one occasion, the suit states.

The asbestos, a natural, fire-retardant fiber that can pose health risks when inhaled, was dumped in the Bena Landfill, 17 miles east of Bakersfield off of Highway 58, the lawsuit charged.

Deputy District Attorney John Mitchell is handling the case for the D.A.'s office.

Mitchell said he is ready to go to trial on the case or consider a settlement proposal.

Like the lawsuit, work on the Padre has remained stalled.

Mitchell said there is nothing legally stopping work on the Padre from continuing while the court case is handled.

Cooper agreed but said Pacifica isn't moving forward at this time for business reasons.

"We would very much like to clear up the legal concerns," he said.

The Padre, opened in April 1928, was owned for 45 years by Milton "Spartacus" Miller, a downtown legend who fought City Hall over fire laws that closed most of his hotel to overnight visitors.

Miller died in 1999.

His widow, Lora Gordon Miller, sold the hotel to Pacifica on April 16, 2002.

Renovation of the hotel has been plagued by delays and indecision. For a time Pacifica could not decide if it would turn the property into apartments and offices or rebuild it as a hotel.

Pacifica has since said the building will be refurbished as a boutique hotel.

The only recent movement at the building was a delivery of awnings for the building's exterior.

Jerry Margrave, owner of Specialty Trim and Awning in Bakersfield, said the awnings have been finished since December 2003 and Pacifica finally agreed to store the awnings at the hotel.

"I couldn't store them any longer," Margrave said.

He said he can't wait to see the Padre finished -- especially since the company did such a great job fixing up the exterior of the historic hotel.

"It's part of Bakersfield," he said.

So far the hotel has been repainted, its roof signs have been partially restored, fire safety systems have been rebuilt and the building has been gutted to make way for new improvements.

Sludge bill gets panel's blessing

Florez wins key victory in fight to keep biosolids out of Kern

By VIC POLLARD, Californian Sacramento Bureau
Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, May 4, 2005

SACRAMENTO -- In a defeat for Los Angeles and Orange County sanitation agencies, a Senate committee Tuesday narrowly endorsed a bill that would make it easier for Kern County to ban sewage sludge imports.

The bill is a compromise version of legislation by state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, that originally called for a statewide ban on all exports of sewage across county lines.

Florez said he had to weaken the bill to avoid defeat in the face of fierce opposition from influential big-city officials.

Counties have always had the ability to ban sewage imports, but Florez said the bill would also give Kern new protection against lawsuits by sludge generators. The new version of the bill would allow county supervisors to ban imports only after current contracts for fertilizing farmland with sludge expire.

But Florez said he was delighted by Tuesday's approval from the Senate Environmental Quality Committee.

"I think it's a very big blow to the Los Angeles and Orange County sludge generators who have been exporting sludge to Kern County," he said. "It ultimately provides Kern County the shield it needs to keep the stuff away."

Kern County supervisors once voted unanimously to support the earlier version of the bill seeking a total ban, but they were happy to take what they could get Tuesday.

"That would be fantastic," said Supervisor Don Maben about protection for the county from sludge lawsuits. "I hope it makes it through the whole machine."

"I'm personally supportive of anything he (Florez) can do that can tighten up control we have over our own destiny," said Supervisor Ray Watson, adding that his main objective is to work with the Kern County Water Agency to "make sure we get biosolids removed from over our water bank."

Nearly all of Los Angeles' sewage is applied to the so-called "Green Acres" farm southwest of Bakersfield near the water bank. Crops grown there are sold to nearby dairy farmers for feed.

Florez introduced the bill in response to growing public outrage about some 450,000 tons of sludge being trucked into Kern annually and spread on farmland as fertilizer.

Sewage sludge, more politely known as biosolids, is the solid byproduct of urban sewage treatment plants. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says it is safe for land disposal, but many people and some government agencies have fears about potential air and water pollution.

Florez noted that the sludge is spread on farmland overlying one of the state's most valuable groundwater storage aquifers.

A Georgia attorney, who was active in a lawsuit in which a court ruled that sewage sludge was responsible for the death of 300 dairy cows, told the committee the EPA and biosolids generators are deceiving the public about its safety.

"Sewage sludge is what it is; it's snake oil," said attorney Ed Hallman.

He said investigators in the Georgia case, in which the cows died after eating hay fertilized by sludge, found many loopholes in the regulations on land disposal of sludge.

"When a problem occurs, there is no one to hold accountable for that problem," he said.

Many of Kern County's major farm companies are opposed to the use of sludge as fertilizer, said a representative they sent to the hearing.

"It is an irresponsible disposal operation. It has to stop," said Paul Giboney, who said he spoke for Kern Food Growers Against Sewage Sludge.

The bill drew stiff opposition from more than a dozen people from sewage agencies in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties as well as the San Francisco Bay area.

Lobbyist Mike Dillon said the state's major sanitation agencies oppose the bill "because of the unacceptable precedent it would set."

"We are also concerned," he continued, "about the misimpression it gives, that biosolids are bad."

Marlaine Hudnall, biosolids program manager for the sewage agencies, said the bill ignores the interdependence among counties for waste disposal.

"Oil field brines (from Kern) are taken to Oxnard for treatment and then they are discharged to the ocean," she said.

In a related move Tuesday, Florez announced he plans to introduce legislation that will require sewage agencies to monitor the biosolid they export as fertilizer for toxic chemicals.

"A standard exists, but sludge generators know nobody is watching," Florez said.

"Enforcement and real consequences are the only means by which this industry will change."

-- Californian staff writer Gretchen Wenner contributed to this report.

Business owners fear hike in fees

County may raise fees for health inspections

By Lynn Doan, Staff writer

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, May 3, 2005

Dining out could get a bit more expensive for Tulare County residents if the county's Board of Supervisors approves higher fees for restaurants and other food producers.

Larry Dwoskin, the county's director of environmental health, will ask the board's approval May 17 to charge food businesses up to 5 percent more for health inspections, he said. Dwoskin said the fee hikes would cover the growing costs of inspecting the facilities.

Inspection fees for restaurants are among the most visible targets. But Dwoskin said fees would also rise for most other facilities that require health inspections, including dairies, public pools and grocery stores.

In all, he said, more than 100 fees will go up within the division, for everything from health inspections to pet adoptions.

Dwoskin said the last fee hike for restaurants was about two years ago, when supervisors approved a 6 percent increase.

"That's a pretty small fraction of what they might be asked to pay," he said.

But business owners warned that the more they have to pay for inspections, the more their customers will have to pay for food.

"Anytime you talk about raising things like fees, they're ultimately passed on to consumers," said Mike Cully, executive director of the Visalia Chamber of

Commerce. "Our businesses have no other choice but to absorb the costs or pass it onto consumers."

Mondo Apodaca, manager of The Depot restaurant in Visalia, agreed that customers would most likely bear the brunt of the fee hikes.

"You have to pass it on; it's hard," Apodaca said. "We try to maintain our costs to remain competitive, but it's tough with all these increases."

The cost of meals has already been rising because of gasoline, meat and produce prices, Apodaca said. "We already pay way too much [for inspections] as it is," said Apodaca, who pays \$475 a year to the county. "It's just outrageous."

Inflation

Dwoskin said his division must raise fees to account for inflation and higher standards of living.

"As inflation occurs, we have to find ways of actually meeting these additional costs," he said.

Karl Merten, owner of Cafe 225 in downtown Visalia, said the problem doesn't lie as much in the environmental health division's fee, but the "cumulative nature of fees over fees" that he is required to pay.

"I think what irritates us all more than any one fee is that we get fee'd to death for everything nowadays," Merten said. "I get tired of fees."

On top of the \$350 annual fee he pays for health inspections, Merten said he must pay a business tax and fees to the Visalia Police Department, the fire department and the county for catering.

Merten said he understands that the county is only trying to cover the costs of inspections, but said his money would be better spent hiring more inspectors to improve sanitation in restaurants.

As for Dwoskin putting the blame on inflation rates, Merten said, "Inflation, yeah, right."

"I wish I could raise my prices when everything goes up," he said. "Well, I do."

But restaurants will not be the only ones affected by the fee increases.

Not just restaurants

Bill Boersma, owner of Bravo Farms north of Visalia, said he remembers when the county used to conduct inspections for free, "just part of the county's deal." Now, he said, he pays \$104 a month for inspections.

And a 5 percent increase may not sound like much, Boersma said, but it's a lot for his small dairy, which is made up of 75 cows, he said.

"My family can eat for a week or two on that kind of money, so yeah, it is a lot," said Boersma, who mainly produces cheese.

J.P. Cativiela, program coordinator for the Dairy Community Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship, said Tulare County's dairymen are more concerned with the number of fees they must pay to various agencies, including the San Joaquin Valley Air Control District.

"The concern is when people are regulating the same things and stacking up the fees," he said.

Apodaca said he and several other restaurant owners plan to attend the Board of Supervisors meeting May 17 to protest the fee increases.

Growing Problems Give Ports a Bad Reputation

Rising trade is creating jobs, but neighbors worry about pollution and road congestion

By Ronald D. White, Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles Times, Wednesday, May 4, 2005

Cargo is arriving at a record pace, while shippers worry about traffic jams and product delays. Employment is growing, but neighbors complain about congestion and pollution. And no one knows where to find the money for badly needed transportation improvements.

Welcome to the nation's most successful - and much-maligned - seaports.

The ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the busiest outside Asia, are off to a booming start in 2005. But the twin ports, long a source of high-paying jobs and a growth engine for the Southland economy, are increasingly viewed in a negative light, according to a report on local cargo trends to be released today.

"International trade no longer wears a white hat," said Jack Kyser, chief economist for the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. and coauthor of the report. "The industry has a major challenge on its hands, and unfortunately it is well behind in solving the problems."

The report details trade activities within the Los Angeles Customs District, which includes both ports, as well as Los Angeles International and Ontario airports. The report predicts that the total value of two-way trade through the district should increase 14.3% to a record \$302.1 billion this year.

The report comes as economists and shipping experts are predicting an additional 10% increase over last year's record cargo container level at the ports - from the equivalent of 13.1 million 20-foot-long containers to more than 14 million.

But that growth has come at a price. Emissions from giant container ships and the hundreds of diesel-powered trains and trucks that haul cargo to and from the ports are the biggest source of air pollution in Southern California. And truck congestion on area freeways continues to grate on motorists.

That said, the report notes that the ports and their related industries continue to be a reliable job generator, adding 42,600 jobs in the five-county area last year to a total of 404,600 workers.

"The good news is that the ports are generating a lot of jobs and income," Kyser said. He noted, however, that other West Coast ports had been aggressively trying to lure traffic away from L.A. and Long Beach.

"There are more alligators nipping at our heels," Kyser said, although the report notes that much of the traffic coming into the Southern California ports is used locally and isn't likely to be diverted to other ports.

In fact, although steps have been taken to address labor and rail equipment shortages, the report noted, there is still concern that congestion could flare up again in 2005, especially as more of the monster, 8,000-container ships enter service. During the first quarter of 2005, the two ports handled a record 3.14 million containers, more than 74% higher than 1999 levels and 10% more than in 2004.

Port officials say they have gotten the message. They say they can handle the increasing traffic in a way that reduces daytime congestion and pollution from idling trucks and ships.

"You can't just flip a switch and change things overnight," said Dick Steinke, director of the Port of Long Beach. "But these goals are not mutually exclusive. We can have our cake and eat it too."

Changes have already been made, most notably the addition of thousands of union and nonunion dockworkers in 2004. Jim McKenna, president of the association that represents West Coast shipping lines, said the ports would have enough labor to handle the load this year.

The railroads that serve the ports, mainly Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Union Pacific, said they had continued a major expansion program that had added track as well as hundreds of engineers and locomotives.

Additionally, Burlington Northern has sharply reduced the amount of time it allows customers to leave cargo containers in their rail yards, which had been complicating efforts to make rail traffic more efficient. The railroad has also extended the average length of its trains to 8,000 feet from 7,000 feet to carry more cargo and help get trucks off the freeways.

Beginning this summer, the ports will begin operating at nights and on weekends and will charge customers a fee for using the port during peak daytime hours. The hope is that the expanded hours will persuade shippers to shift arrivals and departures away from peak daytime hours, reducing truck and rail traffic during rush hour.

Charlie Woo, owner of Megatoys Inc., an L.A. toy importer, said he would move some of his business to nights and weekends to avoid paying fees on the 2,000 to 3,000 containers of merchandise his company ships in a given year. And he will stick with using the local ports because it isn't feasible to use other facilities.

Meanwhile, local officials are moving to address some of the ports' environmental problems. Last month, a blue-ribbon panel endorsed a plan to reduce air pollution around the port complex that one regulator said could become a "gold standard" for cleaning up ports nationwide.

Still, the ports and shipping terminals will have to assuage neighbors who use terms such as "port sprawl" to describe increasing traffic and "diesel death zone" to describe port pollution.

"Most of Long Beach gets to suffer a constant low-grade infection from all this," said Diana Mann, a city resident and founder of a group called ECO-Link. "Asking the ports to do something about it is like asking the fox to guard the henhouse."

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More traffic

Top export destinations in 2004 (in billions)

Japan: \$11.2

China: \$9.8

South Korea: \$5.8

Australia: \$5.3

Taiwan: \$4.4

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Top import sources in 2004 (in billions)

China: \$75.7

Japan: \$32.6

South Korea: \$11.0

Taiwan: \$10.3

Malaysia: \$6.8

Sources: Commerce Department, ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach

Governor Shelves Plan to Reorganize Cal/EPA

The decision is the latest instance in which he is backing off from one of his stated top priorities

By Jordan Rau, Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles Times, May 4, 2005

SACRAMENTO - Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration is shelving yet another part of its once ambitious effort to refashion state government.

After months of discussions, officials have decided against going forward this year with a reorganization of the state's environmental agency, according to an internal administration e-mail obtained Tuesday.

The postponement is the latest instance in which the administration has given up, at least for the short term, on one of Schwarzenegger's top priorities in his first year in office: his desire to reorganize California's vast bureaucracy, which the governor called "a mastodon frozen in time and about as responsive."

The Republican administration last year created the California Performance Review, which examined all state agencies and made more than 1,000 recommendations. But so far, only changes to the prison system have been passed by the Legislature, which is dominated by Democrats.

In February, Schwarzenegger withdrew a plan to eliminate 88 state boards and commissions, one of the central proposals in the California Performance Review. It was widely panned as unwise in hearings before the state's Little Hoover Commission, which evaluates all reorganization plans before submission to the Legislature.

Much of the California Performance Review's recommendations on reorganizing environmental oversight had been deeply criticized when they came out in August. In particular, environmentalists and others strongly opposed abolishing the independent boards that establish rules and standards for air quality, waste management and water.

The administration had wanted to give these boards' regulatory responsibilities to agencies that report directly to the governor, but opponents said that would have made rule-makers too susceptible to political pressure from industry.

"They are less vulnerable to mismanagement by the executive branch," said Ann Notthoff, the California advocacy director for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a national nonprofit with offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

But other parts of the plan have been more warmly received by environmentalists and Democrats. The California Performance Review had concluded that there were needless jurisdictional disputes within the California Environmental Protection Agency, with the hodgepodge of regulatory departments and boards in charge of overseeing solid and hazardous waste, oil spills and other environmental hazards.

"We know there are limited dollars to go around, so efficiency is good for the environment," said Bill Allayaud, state director of Sierra Club California.

The review noted, for example, that responsibility to prevent and deal with oil spills is split among three separate parts of the state bureaucracy; consolidating them, the report said, would eventually save \$1.9 million a year. Pollution prevention efforts also are divided among multiple entities.

"Creating a centralized point of authority would increase responsibility and accountability for cleanup and public health protection," the report states.

In an e-mail sent Monday to other members of the administration, Alan Lloyd, Cal/EPA's secretary, wrote: "This is to inform you that after much discussion a decision has been made not to proceed with a governor's reorganization plan for Cal/EPA in the current year. We will continue to work with the governor's office and internally to improve our organization."

Terry Tamminen, Schwarzenegger's Cabinet secretary, said that the administration still hoped to reformulate Cal/EPA next year or later. He said the administration was likely to submit reorganization proposals for several other parts of state government in time for the Legislature to consider them before adjourning in August, but he would not name which ones.

"It takes a terrific amount of work for people to do this right," Tamminen said. "It's a tremendous amount of work to take what [the California Performance Review] gave us last year, which was a year's worth of work, and then to get stakeholder input" and forge a proposal.

Democratic lawmakers said they may move forward with some agency reorganization on their own. Sen. Liz Figueroa (D-Fremont), who heads a panel examining government efficiency, said Schwarzenegger has been spending too much time on planning a special election this fall.

"I'm really disappointed that the governor seems so preoccupied with these ballot initiatives and has pretty much dropped the ball on reformulating the way government operates," she said. "He started this discussion."

Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica), who heads the Senate's Natural Resources and Water Committee, said she is considering ideas such as combining some of the separate boards within Cal/EPA, and making other "targeted" changes. She said Schwarzenegger had overstepped by trying to do such a comprehensive overhaul, given the incredible complexity of many of the bureaucracies.

"It seems like all the other things he bit off, it seemed to be chock-full of everybody's ideas of what should be done," Kuehl said. "I think it was good of the governor to abandon this kind of wholesale, across-the-board, unfocused approach."

Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Wednesday, May 4, 2005:

Bakersfield at 300,000: Can you believe it?

By ROBERT PRICE, Californian staff columnist

You knew this day was coming. You've driven past housing developments that, as best you can remember, were almond orchards or rows of alfalfa just the previous week.

And now, practically overnight, as if Rod Serling had somehow orchestrated the transformation, those fields are cul-de-sacs filled with twig-trunked trees, spiky green lawns and curbside skateboard ramps.

Nevertheless, it's mildly stunning to realize that the population of Bakersfield proper now unofficially exceeds 300,000. In one dizzying 12-month burst of growth, Bakersfield has leapfrogged past Riverside and Stockton to become the 11th largest city in California.

Maybe you heard earlier this week that the State Department of Finance now puts Bakersfield's population, as of Jan. 1, at 295,893. The agency also puts Bakersfield's 2004 rate of growth at 4.7 percent, largest in California among cities with at least 200,000 people.

Assuming that rate of growth has continued into 2005 -- and that's almost certainly the case, given the ongoing demand for building permits, according to Jim Eggert, a principal planner with the city -- Bakersfield hit 300,000 on or about April 15.

The metro area's total population, including unincorporated islands and appendages such as Oildale and Alta Vista, is roughly 452,000.

Three hundred thousand has a certain ring to it, a resonance that suggests a city of consequence. It will look good on city-limits signs along the freeway, on Chamber of Commerce brochures and in PowerPoint presentations on economic development.

The new population number also underscores the continuing challenges that city and regional planners will continue to face, however -- core issues like traffic, [air quality](#), water and public safety, but also tougher-to-quantify matters. Things like a city's personality and character. Parks, recreation, arts and diversity of business are some of the relevant factors there. But it's more than that.

Call it vibrancy. Some cities have it and some cities don't, and it doesn't merely boil down to money and a city's willingness to spend it.

It's about vision and the will to act on it. Bakersfield's breakneck pace of growth -- brought more clearly into focus by the 300,000 population threshold -- only makes those things more important now. Because tomorrow somebody's pouring more asphalt. Somewhere.

The new population milestone might sound good to some ears, but it has offsetting negatives: As the city grows, sales and hotel tax revenues will grow, allowing the city more flexibility in some areas.

But service costs will grow too, more so if Bakersfield continues to be among the state's leaders in residential lot size.

And if growth brings more affluence, Bakersfield's chances of jump-starting urban redevelopment will take a hit, because fewer areas will qualify for federal redevelopment grants.

But maybe that's making lemons out of lemonade: Other cities have undertaken positive makeovers long after they became "cities of consequence" and achieved new levels of affluence.

Bakersfield need only look at Anaheim, the city immediately above it on the list of California's most populous.

No. 10 Anaheim (pop. 345,317) pulled off a striking remake of its downtown a few years ago, and the tourism business in the Orange County city has never been better.

Growth doesn't blunt a city's ability to remake itself, but it does up the ante.

A few other statistical morsels from the Department of Finance report:

Bakersfield added 13,222 residents in 2004, nearly as many as San Diego (14,035) and San Jose (13,625), the state's second- and third-largest cities.

Bakersfield officials can't say how many new residents moved in from other places in 2004, or to what extent the population increase reflected the number of local births in excess of deaths.

But they do know how many people became residents because their homes were annexed into the city: just 19. Most of the city's annexations in 2004 were in unpopulated areas.

Kern County added 20,669 residents in 2004, seventh-most among the state's 58 counties. Kern was the sixth-fastest growing California county at 2.8 percent -- the second-fastest rate among counties with at least 350,000 people.

Bakersfield's growth rate might have been No. 1 among larger cities, but it wasn't No. 1 in Kern County. That distinction belongs to McFarland, which jumped to 12,179 -- an increase of 8.2 percent. Delano grew to 45,056, an increase of 3.4 percent.

Maricopa lost four people. We're not certain where they went, but the town is down to 1,147 people.

Sacramento Bee, Commentary, Wednesday, May 4, 2005:

Doing tough homework on asbestos

By Anita Creamer -- Bee Columnist

Two moms want answers. And so Vicki Summers and Jennifer Pedersen are discussing life at risk here in El Dorado Hills, a place that looks more like a suburban California paradise, with its hilly, oak-studded landscape and pricey custom housing developments, than a potentially toxic hell.

"I'm trying to limit myself to two hours a day on the Internet," says Summers, 45, a former eighth-grade English teacher in the San Juan district.

She's forcing herself to cut back on her homework. Even so, two big white binders filled with newspaper clippings and scientific data culled from the Internet are on the breakfast-nook table in front of her - her research on a potentially dangerous variety of asbestos that occurs naturally in veins of serpentine rock found in parts of El Dorado County.

Like at Oak Ridge High School, where her son is a senior and Pedersen's son is a junior. And at nearby Community Park, with its miles of beautiful hiking trails.

Exposure to amphibole asbestos fibers could lead to an increased risk of a deadly form of cancer called mesothelioma.

Summers has become quite conversant in mesothelioma, in ambient air testing versus activity-based testing, in dust mitigation measures. She's been on the phone with a host of environmental experts. She faithfully attends community meetings, as does Pedersen.

Both plan to be at the meeting at 7 p.m. Friday at the Community Park gymnasium on the results of recent U.S. Environmental Protection Agency testing.

"Vicki could do a thesis on this," says Pedersen, 45. "She's so smart. She wants real answers. She doesn't like going to all these meetings and being patted on the head. But nobody loves El Dorado Hills more than Vicki."

"Oh, you, too," says Summers.

"I absolutely love it here," says Pedersen, nodding. "My husband said, 'People get angry when you bring up negative things about their community.' But if you're too afraid to ask hard questions, nothing gets done."

The problem is, no one knows.

Local and federal environmental experts can't seem to agree on the scope of the issue, and no one can provide definitive, reassuring answers. No one can even say for certain who gets asbestos-related lung diseases, and when, and after what degree of toxic exposure.

In the absence of answers, a fair amount of public silence. Everyone's life involves some amount of risk, after all - and through the years, we've all bitten a few too many Alar-tainted apples to take every dire warning as an automatic kiss of death.

"I don't think people know what to do," says Summers.

Lots of people simply prefer not to think about the asbestos, she says. Or they resent stories on the subject as needlessly alarmist, and they worry less about the health dangers than about the risk to their property values and their comfortable lifestyle.

"People aren't involved because they don't think there's anything they can do," says Pedersen. "It's almost too awful to think about."

And more-immediate concerns take precedence over the vague possibility of developing a lung disease in a few decades. For example, Pedersen's older son, who's 20 and in the Army, is about to be shipped out to Iraq.

The Summers family moved to El Dorado Hills from Fair Oaks a dozen years ago, drawn by the area's beauty, friendliness and good schools. The Pedersens came from Fremont seven years ago for the same reasons.

"I've never met such warm people," says Pedersen. "I love it here. My children are thriving. We're hoping more than anyone else that everything turns out to be OK."

Summers, meanwhile, is hoping that rather than hiding from the issue, El Dorado Hills will emerge as a national leader in dealing with asbestos risk.

"I didn't want to get obsessed about this," she says. "But you have to be informed so you can ask intelligent questions."

And hope for some answers, at long last.

Letters to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, May 3, 2005:

'Clean diesel'

State Sen. Charles Poochigian deserves an "A" for his efforts to take older, polluting school buses off the road to improve air quality in the Valley (story April, 26).

Advanced technologies used in newer, clean diesel engines -- such as particulate traps and catalytic converters -- can be used to retrofit older diesel engines and reduce pollutants up to 90%. Today's diesel-powered school buses already produce 80% less particulate matter and nitrogen oxide emissions -- a key ingredient in the formation of smog -- than those built just 10 years ago.

Recognizing this, the California Air Resources Board has allocated half of its \$50 million school bus program to clean diesel technology, whether purchasing new buses or particulate filters.

Coupled with Proposition 98 funds, that's good news for Sen. Poochigian's plan, and all residents of the Valley, where clean diesel is already at work on roads and highways.

Allen Schaeffer, Executive Director, Diesel Technology Forum, Frederick, Md.

Letters to the Fresno Bee, Tuesday, May 3, 2005:

People will suffer

When I was growing up, we used to burn grape stakes [story April 29] in the fireplace for warmth and enjoyment during the winter months.

My feeling today is that the grape stakes are not toxic and do not cause as much pollution as cars.

Fresno County is the No. 1 agricultural producing county in California.

Yes, we do have individuals who are not agriculture-friendly. Today, we have more individuals living in California who cause more pollution and toxic waste than the agriculture industry. We keep putting restrictions on agriculture and we, the people, will suffer with higher food prices and lack of food commodities.

Charles E. Robinson, Fresno

