

[Commentary in the Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance Register \(August 17\); Stockton Record \(August 18\); and Bakersfield Californian \(August 19\), under different headlines:](#)

Valley residents may breathe easier knowing the truth

Air quality has improved, but more work needed

By Seyed Sadredin

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District

According to a recent statewide survey conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California and funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, 64 percent of Valley residents believe air quality today is worse than it was 10 years ago.

The truth, however, is that we have made significant progress in reducing air pollution. Air quality is much better today, but due to the Valley's pollution-retaining bowl shape and weather conditions, we still face enormous challenges.

Extensive air monitoring and scientific data show air quality today is better than it was 10 years ago, 15 years ago or 25 years ago. Since 1980, air pollution from manufacturing, industrial and commercial businesses in the Valley has been reduced by 80 percent. Since 1980, total emissions - even including cars and trucks - have been reduced by 60 percent, despite a tremendous growth in population. Exposure to high air pollution concentrations has been reduced significantly throughout the Valley.

This poll, nonetheless, provides a valuable glimpse into Valley residents' attitudes and preferences about environmental and air quality issues. For those of us charged with the responsibility to protect and promote public health, the reported public opinions on a couple of questions raise interesting public policy issues. In particular, the public's understanding of the state of air quality in the Valley and its views on the balance between economic and environmental concerns warrant further debate and can be a guide in formulating effective future actions.

Does acknowledging past progress diminish or enhance our ability to compel the public to do its part to help clean the air, and to pressure the state and federal governments to come through with their fair share of funding for the Valley? This is a real question for those of us who advocate for cleaner air in the Valley.

Honesty is always the best policy. Truthfully pointing to major progress in improving our air quality and acknowledging the sacrifice and investments made by Valley businesses and residents is essential to building the trust and confidence necessary to ask for more. It will be difficult to ask businesses to spend more if we cannot point to the fact that the billions of dollars they have already spent have resulted in real and significant improvements in air quality.

As for the balance between health and economy, 50 percent to 65 percent of the respondents in the poll support tougher regulations on agricultural and industrial operations, even if it increased business costs. Valley businesses already are subject to some of the toughest air regulations in the nation, and the smog-causing emissions from these businesses already have been reduced by 80 percent. The regulations in the recent smog plan adopted by the Valley air district will have an additional compliance cost of \$20 billion for businesses. Knowing this, would Valley residents support additional measures, such as banning business activities on high smog days, if that resulted in the loss of businesses and jobs or higher costs on goods and services? The answer might hinge on the level of personal sacrifice that we might be willing to pay and the economic and health cost of air pollution.

Effective solutions will require a complete understanding of the complex scientific, socioeconomic and technological issues that affect our air. We should resist poll-driven impulses and have a

robust and well-informed dialogue on these questions. There should be no debate, however, that there still is work to be done, and the Valley should speak with one voice in demanding that the state and federal governments do their fair share for the Valley.

Seyed Sadredin is executive director/air pollution control officer of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. He is based in Fresno.

Clean air violations gone with the wind

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee
Friday, August 17, 2007

Federal authorities are standing by a decision to declare that the Valley has met health standards for dust, soot and chemical specks in the air -- despite three days last year when the pollution exceeded legal limits.

At stake are breathing conditions for Valley residents during the fall, when the potentially dangerous particles known as PM-10 are at their worst.

If the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had included the high readings, the Valley would again be in violation of the standard for particle pollution. And that would force the local air officials to be more aggressive about pollution reduction to benefit the health of residents.

The EPA on Wednesday released a 109-page document that said the bad-air readings should be ignored because they were caused by high winds, which allows them to be legally excluded from records. The conclusion affirms a decision made last year before the dusty days could be considered. "We believe, based on our very thorough review of the facts, that our finding last year is valid," said Kerry Draker of the EPA's regional air division in San Francisco. Local air officials said the news is further evidence that Valley air is getting cleaner.

But environmentalists said it looked like the EPA was trying to justify its previous decision, which was based on the fact that the Valley recorded no dust violations from 2003 through 2005.

"The Clean Air Act does not allow EPA to make a decision and then manufacture a reason for that decision a year later," said Paul Cort, staff attorney for Earthjustice, a nonprofit legal watchdog group in Oakland.

Federal officials say the document released this week is a proposal. They are taking public comment for 30 days. After considering the comments, the EPA will make a final decision Jan. 31.

If the EPA had recommended that the area should no longer be in attainment for PM-10 standards, stricter, more expensive rules might have been necessary for farms and businesses.

State and local air officials had argued that the high readings last fall should be excluded because of west Valley winds of up to 50 miles per hour.

Earthjustice disagrees, saying the wind did not appear strong enough to sustain dust clouds. The group last year petitioned to have the EPA's attainment decision reviewed in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. No hearing date has been set.

EPA's conclusion is no surprise, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District officials said. The district board has passed rules in the last five years that have cut tiny particles of pollution from fireplaces, unpaved roads, farm tilling and construction sites. "This gives us better standing

to ask the public and businesses to do more to clean up the air," said district executive director Seyed Sadredin. "It adds to our credibility."

The district board next month will consider approving a plan to keep Valley air below the legal threshold for PM-10, Sadredin said.

PM-10 -- particulate matter 10 microns wide -- is one-seventh the width of a human hair. The PM-10 category of pollutants also encompasses specks much smaller, some of which form by combining chemicals such as ammonia from dairies and oxides of nitrogen from vehicle exhaust. The microscopic pollution can penetrate deep into the lungs, sometimes triggering asthma attacks and other lung ailments. Medical researchers have connected it to heart problems and early mortality.

PM-10 violations generally occur in fall months. The three bad days last year were Sept. 22, Oct. 25 and Dec. 8, all occurring in the Corcoran and Bakersfield areas.

The wind along the west side of the Valley gusted up to 40 miles per hour on the dates of the high readings in September and October, the EPA document said. The highest gust in December was 50 miles per hour, the document said.

Earthjustice researchers dispute the analysis, questioning whether the wind was consistently as severe as the EPA is saying. The researchers also do not think there was enough sustained wind to carry dust clouds dozens of miles from the Corcoran area to the Bakersfield monitors.

EPA affirms valley's air was clean in 2006

In the S.F. Chronicle, Friday, August 17, 2007

Fresno, Calif. (AP) -- The Environmental Protection Agency affirmed a previous ruling that the San Joaquin Valley's air met federal clean air standards last year, saying a temporary spike in particulate pollution could be ignored because it was caused by high winds and construction.

In October, the federal government ruled that the region was no longer plagued with excessive levels of PM-10, tiny particles of airborne smoke, dust and soot that are linked to asthma and heart problems.

Environmental and community groups sued in December, saying the EPA ignored crucial data from air monitors in Bakersfield and Corcoran that showed numerous dust and soot violations.

Temporary bad air readings from those monitors should be excluded from the records because they were caused by high winds and construction that kicked up dust in the valley, the EPA said in a proposed finding released Wednesday.

Local and federal air officials hailed last year's ruling as a major cleanup milestone for the eight-county San Joaquin Valley, which is considered one of the country's most polluted air basins.

The proposed finding released this week will undergo public review, and the agency will make a final decision on the rule by Jan. 31.

In the meantime, plaintiffs including Latino Issues Forum, Medical Advocates for Healthy Air and three chapters of the Sierra Club are awaiting a hearing at the San Francisco-based 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to review the agency's original finding.

Smoky Santa Barbara fire roars on

Officials warn about air quality as blaze edges closer to Ventura County

By Beth Barrett MEDIANEWS STAFF

Contra Costa Times, Saturday, August 18, 2007

OJAI -- A vast fire scorching Santa Barbara County turned Ojai into a smoky caldron Friday, with amber skies obscuring mountains and white ash dropping on homes as the six-week-old blaze crept within five miles of Ventura County.

The fire prompted air-quality warnings for the Ojai Valley and advisories as far south as the San Gabriel Mountains, the Santa Clarita Valley and the west San Fernando Valley.

The blaze has moved erratically, scorching more than 143,000 acres since July 4, and officials said the southeast fringe could cross the county line by Sunday.

Strike forces were targeting flare-ups in the Diablo Canyon drainage area about 22 miles from Ojai, the hottest spot in the long-running fire, said Larry Comerford, U.S. Forest Service spokesman.

"It's really active there," Comerford said. "It's following the topography down a canyon where there's heavy fuels -- a lot of thick scrub oaks and things like that."

Burn-off fires may be started today to try to block the fire's eastward advance -- which could result in the closure of Highway 33 between Ojai and Cuyama. Lockwood Valley Road also could close during the operation, officials said Friday afternoon.

Ventura officials also began monitoring the smoke plume that's already brought days of aggravation and health advisories to Santa Barbara and other coastal communities.

"We had been ready in Ojai and we stepped (the warning) up," said Mike Villegas, executive officer with the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District.

Villegas said next week likely will determine how deeply the smoke will affect the rest of the county.

Falling ash

The South Coast Air Quality Management District received reports of ash falling in Newhall and issued a smoke advisory Friday across Los Angeles County for the San Gabriel Mountains, the Santa Clarita Valley, the west San Fernando Valley and the northwest Los Angeles area.

In Ojai, popular inns and restaurants were busy fielding questions from weekend vacationers about the fire as residents coped with sore throats, ashy grit on their cars and anxiety as the flames crept closer.

About 50 Matilija Canyon residents in the hills to the north could be the first to be affected by the blaze.

Ojai police Sgt. Pat Ruby said there have been preliminary discussions about voluntary evacuations.

"Right now, we're waiting to see what happens," Ruby said.

Cookie Williams said Friday that her hilltop retirement home in the center of Ojai provides a bird's-eye view of the fire's approach.

"There's a lot of smoke in the air and the sun is orange. Normally from here, you can see the Topa Topa (Mountains), but today, you can't see them at all," she said. "The ash is terrible; everything is coated."

Williams, a veteran of Malibu brush fires when she lived with her husband near Zuma Beach, said plumes of smoke exploded over the ridge to the north and northwest of Ojai on Tuesday.

But, she said, since then the winds have grown calmer.

"There hasn't been any wind, and it's the wind that worries me," she said.

Villegas said the smoke hovering over the area has held fairly steady at about 2,000 feet.

Breathing affected

If the wind changes direction, however, Ventura County could take a collective gasp as the elderly, children, anyone doing physical labor outdoors and those with respiratory illnesses are affected.

"We will try to get the word out to superintendents in every school district what the air quality is. If you see smoke across the field, don't practice or go into the gym," Villegas said.

County residents also can expect more smoky smells and ash in the late evening and morning hours as winds rise out of the canyons.

Residents sensitive to smoke are being encouraged to limit outdoor activities and contact a doctor if they feel ill.

On Friday, smoke was visible in the western Antelope Valley and in Santa Clarita some 50 miles away from the fire.

Santa Clarita's smog levels were higher than normal due to the fire and a strong high-pressure area that's created a warm and stagnant air flow, said David Gomberg, a meteorologist.

Tina Cherry, a spokeswoman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, said the agency is predicting unhealthy levels of ozone for sensitive people in Santa Clarita today.

Moving away from coast

Santa Barbara residents were told Friday that the blaze is moving away from the coast, although towering columns of smoke are expected to continue to the north as the fire burns in the Judell and Logan Canyon areas about 25 miles away.

While officials said residents are not panicking, the fire's tenacity -- and its smoky irritants -- have left residents simmering from the San Joaquin Valley to the coastal communities of Santa Barbara and Montecito.

The fire has destroyed only one outbuilding so far, but on Friday continued to threaten nearly 600 structures, including nearly 500 homes.

As crews raced on Friday to build seven miles of fire line, the blaze had burned an additional 8,800 or so acres in 12 hours.

The blaze has been difficult to contain because much of it is in some of the most rugged, thickly vegetated wilderness of the Los Padres National Forest.

So far, it has cost more than \$76 million as nearly 3,000 firefighters and air crews from Santa Barbara, Ventura and Los Angeles counties have battled the blaze. There have been 29 injuries.

Nearly two dozen helicopters and eight air tankers have joined in the effort, and about 69 fire crews with 57 bulldozers have been working in shifts around the clock.

Fire officials estimate the blaze is about 60 percent contained, with full containment not expected for three more weeks.

Huge SoCal fire grows, governor declares state of emergency

In the Bakersfield Californian and San Diego Union-Tribune, Monday, Aug. 20 2007

A massive fire in the Los Padres National Forest grew an additional 11,500 acres Sunday, making one of the largest wildfire in modern California history, officials said.

Authorities closed a highway and encouraged residents of about two dozen rural Ventura County homes to evacuate while Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency for Ventura County. The move clears the way for state government assistance with costs related to the fire.

"It's growing, and it may become the granddaddy of them all before this is over with," Maeton Freel, a fire information officer with the U.S. Forest Service told the Ventura County Star.

The Zaca Fire's northeast flank burned within a mile of Highway 33 in the Pine Mountain area, said Freel, while its western edge jumped across firelines dug by bulldozers.

In the south, the fire burned about 10 miles away from Carpinteria and crews cleared out fire breaks with the help of offshore winds.

"The east side has been holding steady at a fuel break for 2 days, but if it jumps it'll be heading toward Ojai, eating about 1,000 acres an hour," Freel said.

A 45-mile stretch on Highway 33, between Ventucopa and Wheeler Gorge, was closed to all traffic, including residents, said fire spokesman Larry Comerford.

Most of the homes in the recommended evacuation zone are surrounded by alfalfa fields and are near the Deal and Rancho Nuevo Canyons in the Dick Smith Wilderness, where the fire has spread, said fire spokesman Ed Linnquist.

The fire had burned 199,588 acres of wilderness, or 312 square miles. It was 75 percent contained, with more than 3,000 personnel working on it.

Full containment was predicted Sept. 7. The fire has cost more than \$83 million to fight since it was ignited by sparks from equipment being used to repair a water pipe.

Fire officials anticipated lower humidity on Monday, which could hamper their efforts to build fire breaks.

Nearly 1,400 square miles of wilderness and forest lands in Santa Barbara, Ventura and Kern counties remained closed to visitors.

In 1932, the Matilija Fire scorched about 220,000 acres in the Los Padres National Forest, near where the Zaca fire has burned since it began on July 4, fire officials said.

The 2003 Cedar Fire near San Diego burned more than 273,000 acres, destroyed 4847 structures, and killed 15 people.

Cuyama will not be evacuated

By Dennis McCall, Midway Driller Staff Writer
Taft Midway Driller, Friday, Aug. 17, 2007

Talk on the street Tuesday was that Taft was preparing to become an evacuation site for Cuyama Valley residents choking on the smoke and ash of a nearby wildfire that has been burning out of control for six weeks.

But that's not true.

Skies above Cuyama, while a bit hazy on Wednesday, were more blue than anything else.

It's the skies over Taft that blot out the sun and dust the community with ash and soot.

"You guys in Taft are suffering more than we are," said fire information officer Sue Exline said from the fire command center in New Cuyama's Richardson Park where 900 support personnel are headquartered.

"We're not planning to evacuate Cuyama," she said. "We are planning to evacuate Highway 33 people to Taft College if that becomes necessary," Exline said.

She's talking about people who live alongside Highway 33 in the Ventucopa area, but the flames are still about 10 miles west of the highway,

Cuyama-20 miles north of the burn area-isn't getting as much smoke and ash as Taft and other parts of Kern County.

Progress was made Wednesday that boosted containment from 44 to 63 percent. Full containment is not expected until Sept. 7.

As of 8 a.m. Thursday the fire had scorched 127,244 acres (nearly 13,000 acres the previous 24 hours) in the Los Padres National Forest, which remained closed to all but firefighting activities.

On the northern perimeter nearest Cuyama Valley, firefighters continued a backfiring operation to burn out vegetation between the fireline and the main fire, which is actively burning in Sisquoc Cliff and Logan Canyons.

On the east perimeter nearest Highway 33, the fire continues to actively burn in the area known as the Narrows in Mono Canyon and is moving east towards the Matilija Wilderness.

The active fire is still burning within the firebreaks designed to contain the fire.

Traffic on Highway 33 to Ojai remains open, but delays might be caused by firefighting operations.

Firefighters secured four miles of fireline on the eastern edge of the fire along Sierra Madre Ridge.

Firelines "three blades wide" are created by the 32 bulldozers working the fire, Exline said. Sixteen miles still need to be built.

Backfire operations also are a crucial tactic.

"We call that indirect strategy. We don't feel comfortable putting firefighters lives at risk in very dangerous areas."

So backfires are set by crews or helicopters in the hope they will burn into the main fire.

"Fire needs oxygen so we set backfires and what happens is the main fire will pull in the backfire."

She said crews are working hard to finish firelines on the north, east and south sides of the huge blaze to "box it in."

Backfiring operations continued through Thursday towards Highway 33.

While hand crews continue to work on the ground, the blaze also is being attacked from the air with 28 helicopters and eight air tankers. Seven of the helicopters are based in Cuyama.

The air assault helps, but the firefighters on the ground are the key, Exline said.

"A lot of people think that the tankers put out the fire. All they can do is slow the fire. It's the boots on the line that put out the fire."

And the Zaca fire has plenty of boots.

Nearly 3,000 people are working the blaze-most of them firefighters.

"About half of them are here (in Cuyama) and half in Santa Barbara," Exline said.

So far, the fire has cost \$73.4 million to fight.

Federal officials test Alviso air for asbestos

In the Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Aug. 20 2007

Federal officials plan to test the air in this small Santa Clara county community to see whether it is finally free of cancer-causing asbestos.

Starting Monday, EPA crews dressed in white moon suits and gas masks will measure the air for asbestos by stirring up dust. They will ride bicycles, run on a sports field, rake dirt and ride all-terrain vehicles while wearing devices that analyze the air.

The agency declared Alviso a Superfund site in 1986 after tests found high levels of asbestos. Although officials say the air was cleaned up by 1993, new testing methods and more sensitive

equipment will allow them to see whether small particles of asbestos remain. If the air is clean, officials say Alviso could be taken off the Superfund list in a year.

Urban Smog Tough on Young Adults' Hearts

Washington Post

Friday, August 17, 2007

(HealthDay News) -- Dirty urban air drags down a number of "biological indicators" pointing to heart risk in young adults, a Taiwanese study shows.

The indicators include autonomic dysfunction, inflammation, oxidative stress, and blood coagulation, according to the study, which was published Aug. 15 in the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine.

"This study provides evidence that urban air pollution is associated with systemic inflammation/oxidative stress, impairment of the fibrinogenic system, activation of blood coagulation and alterations in the autonomic nervous system in young, healthy humans," wrote study lead author Chang-Chuan Chan of the National Taiwan University's College of Public Health.

Chan's team collected blood samples and performed electrocardiograms on 76 healthy college students once a month for three months. They compared the results to data from an air pollution monitoring station located on the students' campus.

They found that increased exposure to common air pollutants was associated with a significant rise in all biological markers of cardiovascular risk.

The study did not look at the precise biological mechanisms involved in this association.

"Further studies with more detailed measurements of cardiovascular endpoints over time are still needed," Chan noted.

"Most pollution literature has shown effects in elderly people, and although there have been experiments in young subjects, epidemiological research has not found such significant effects in young people as with these students in Taiwan," Dr. Benoit Nemery, professor in the division of pneumonology at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, said in a prepared statement. Nemery was not involved in the study.

Valley buckles up new buses

Added safety features drive school district transportation costs higher.

By Eddie Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

Monday, August 20, 2007

The decision about whether to accept a \$1.9 million grant to buy 14 new school buses seemed like a no-brainer.

For \$30,000, Selma Unified School District trustees could replace 14 buses that were at least 30 years old with new vehicles that would not only be less polluting, but would have safety belts.

Still, board members were hesitant. The seat belts would cut the seating capacity of each bus, driving up costs. And many school transportation officials question whether those belts make kids safer.

Selma trustees did approve the purchase of the school buses in June 2006, but "this was not a slam-dunk for our board," said Larry Teixeira, Selma Unified's assistant superintendent for business services.

In July 2005, a California law went into effect requiring all new school buses carrying 16 passengers or more to have lap-and-shoulder seat belts.

The law has brought clear benefits, including better air quality. Newer buses run on compressed natural gas or low-sulfur diesel fuel.

But buses with seat belts carry fewer students, meaning more buses and higher fuel and operating costs for the district. And seat belts can add as much as \$14,000 to the price tag of a new bus, which can cost \$140,000 to \$195,000.

Extra drivers also would have to be hired. This would come at a time when districts already are struggling to find enough drivers.

Kirk Hunter, chief executive officer for the Southwest Transportation Agency, a public entity that operates buses for 14 school districts in western Fresno County, said the law was unnecessary.

"The seat-belt law is what I call legislation by emotion," Hunter said.

The law was written in 1999 by Martin Gallegos, a then-Los Angeles-area Assembly member who sought in part to protect children during rollovers and side collisions.

Proponents of the law argued that annually about six passengers die and thousands are injured in school bus collisions nationwide.

But not everybody agrees that seat belts make school bus travel safer. Transportation directors say the height and padding of seat backs on newer school buses already protect students. And the size and high profile of buses make them more able to sustain collisions.

Some skeptics of the law point to a report by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that shows students are nearly eight times safer in school buses -- most of which don't have seat belts -- than in cars.

The fatality rate for school buses is 0.2 per 100 million vehicle-miles traveled, versus 1.5 per 100 million miles for cars, the report said.

Selma district's Teixeira said he believes there was not enough research to support the seat-belt law.

"My personal opinion on seat belts is that the jury's still out," he said. But from a legislator's perspective, he said, "How can you argue against it?"

About 15% of the state's schoolchildren ride buses to and from school, said John Green, supervisor for the state Department of Education's Office of School Transportation. Deaths involving school bus passengers are rare in California, he said.

"We haven't lost a child inside a school bus in 15 years," he said.

A study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration projected that seat belts in all school buses nationwide might save one child's life each year, Green said.

Still, Green said, state legislators and the public support seat belts in school buses, and school districts are making the law work.

"Some people say it's the end of the world, and I don't believe it is," he said.

Visalia Unified School District bought 10 buses without seat belts just before the law went into effect on July 1, 2005. District officials accelerated the purchase because they were concerned about the added costs of more buses and drivers.

District officials didn't place "dollars in front of safety," said Terry White, Visalia Unified's director of administrative services, but they believe California school buses have a stellar safety record.

"It's hard to improve on zero fatalities," White said.

Seat belts are on the horizon for Visalia students, however. The district has purchased four new buses through a federal clean-air grant and should get them by December.

The transition to seat belts statewide could take a couple of decades. Buses generally last 20 years, but some 30 years old and older are still on the road.

Green said about 1,900 out of 26,000 school buses in California are equipped with lap-shoulder seat belts. California was the first state to require lap-and-shoulder seat belts in school buses, he said. A handful of states require lap belts.

Buses with seat belts are trickling into Valley school district fleets, but Selma Unified is further along than many. The district's seat belt-equipped buses -- 10 already on the road and four more on order -- will make up more than two-thirds of its 20-vehicle fleet.

Teixeira said a grant obtained through the state Air Resources Board and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District allowed Selma Unified to sideline 14 buses built before 1977.

However, bus seating capacity dropped by 25%, he said.

The old buses could accommodate 79 to 84 students. A new bus holds a maximum of 62, but "if you're using it for high school students, probably a lot less," Teixeira said.

Seating capacity should not be an issue for districts, said Green, the state school transportation official. Many buses don't run at capacity anyway, and by reconfiguring routes to make them more efficient, districts could cut down the number of buses needed, he said.

If districts do have to put more buses on the road, they'll need more drivers, and hiring qualified drivers has long been a problem for school districts, said John Clements, director of transportation for Kings Canyon Unified School District. The district operates 62 buses.

"It's hard to find folks to take on this responsibility and work part time," Clements said.

Visalia Unified, which now has five bus-driver openings, is offering newly hired drivers a \$1,000 bonus, White said.

Hunter of Southwest Transportation, which has 64 drivers, said his fleet ran 15 drivers short last school year and lacked 11 drivers at the start of the new school year.

Although unpopular with some school bus officials, the seat belt law is supported by bus drivers, such as Selma Unified's Brandon Morris.

"It's good in a way, because I know the kids will stay in their seats while I'm moving," he said.

But making sure children are buckled up does add a little time to his route, Morris said.

Bobby Ramirez, another Selma Unified driver, said he believes buses with seat belts are safer because children can't move around. But one challenge is making sure students use the shoulder strap properly and don't tuck them under their arms, Ramirez said.

Yolanda Torrez, who has four children in Selma schools, said students on buses should be seat-belted, just like car passengers.

"I think it's a fabulous idea," Torrez said. "I feel so much more comfortable as a parent."

Hunter of Southwest Transportation said his colleagues ask him why he continues to speak out so adamantly against the seat-belt law, which has little chance of being reversed. He said his hope is to call attention to the underfunding by state legislators for school transportation.

"It's unconscionable that they would allow this kind of legislation to pass without putting some funding behind it," Hunter said.

Vincente Fox Named Keynote Speaker for BizTalk '07

By Miles Shuper

Visalia Times Delta, Monday, August 20, 2007

Visalia - Former president of Mexico Vicente Fox will give the keynote address at BizTalk in Visalia Oct. 5.

Marta Sahaguin de Fox, the former first lady of Mexico and a social activist, Olympic Gold Medalist Dominique Dawes and syndicated columnist Ruben Navarrette, Jr. also will be featured at "BizTalk '07, the Business Conference with Connections" at the Visalia Convention Center. The event is the second in which world leaders in politics, business and other fields have been brought to Visalia in an effort to form strategic alliances and promote and advance opportunities and share knowledge with those attending, especially students.

In addition to the keynote addresses, BizTalk will host a variety of specialized and custom breakout sessions designed to provide those in attendance with real-world skills and knowledge of life and business, organizers say.

Announcement of the keynote speakers was made Aug. 14 at the Tulare County Board of Supervisors meeting by Harlan Hutson and Stan Simpson, co-founders of BizTalk.

The focus of the event is to help prepare the next generation for success in the coming decades, with at least 200 Tulare County students invited to the day-long event, Simpson said.

Fox, Mexico's president from 2000 through 2006, is credited with playing a key role in Mexico's democratization and growing economy. His keynote address, entitled "Uneasy Partnership: Mexico and California in the Geo-Political Landscape," is scheduled for 9:20 a.m. Following that talk, Fox, his wife and Navarrette are scheduled to "stop and chat" with students.

Mrs. Fox will deliver her talk at 8:30 a.m. Navarrette, a columnist and editorial board member of the San Diego Union, will be the luncheon speaker at 12:20 p.m. Dawes, a 1996 Olympic Gold Medal gymnast and president of the Women's Sports Foundation, will speak at 1:45 p.m. Her message is "Success as Journey, NOT a destination."

Early bird tickets are available online at biztalkconnections.com for \$129 per person. Additional information is available at 300-8600.

The first week of October will be a busy one in Visalia, featuring world, national, state and local leaders in meetings and conferences. The California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley, [the Air Quality Control Board](#) and the Latino Peace Officers will be gathering and meeting back-to-back over a four-day period.

The air board, on which County Supervisor Steve Worthley serves, moved its date to fit the BizTalk schedule.

Speaking with the media outside the board chambers, Hutson said obtaining the former president and first lady of Mexico for the event "was a perfect fit" for California, especially for the Valley. He said not only the current immigration issues, but trade and other pertinent issues should be very exciting, especially with the involvement of students who will be dealing with those issues in the next decade.

Hutson credited Simpson with having the vision to organize the BizTalk, and said he expects the event to gain even more momentum with the population and economic importance of the San Joaquin Valley.

Simpson and Hutson said before they were able to secure Fox, there were efforts to sign other major personalities including Bono of U2, former President Bill Clinton and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Hutson said scheduling issues didn't allow for Bono to make this year's event. Hutson described Bono, the founder and lead singer of one of the world's most successful rock groups, as an example of someone who uses his fame and fortune to fight against poverty and disease worldwide.

A number of area businesses and business leaders are financially backing BizTalk '07 with the support of the Visalia Chamber of Commerce and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, along with the county and the City of Visalia and other entities.

Solar power gets red -carpet treatment

Fourteen jurisdictions hand out building permits to homeowners for free

By Paul Rogers, MEDIANEWS STAFF

Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, August 20, 2007

Across the Bay Area, when it comes to solar power, red tape has largely been replaced by the red carpet.

In the nearly two years since environmentalists first started noting the wildly varying permit fees that cities charge homeowners seeking to harness the sun's power, the eye-opening push appears to be paying off: From Silicon Valley to the North Bay's bucolic wine country, dozens of cities are falling all over themselves to make it easier for residents to put up the panels.

Why? It might be from a genuine desire to reduce smog and global warming. Or maybe that local politicians are worried about looking out-of-step with Bay Area voters who blend a passion for green politics with a love for high-tech solutions.

Whatever the reason, consider:

- The average cost that cities charge for building and planning permits to install a typical solar system on a home has fallen 61percent — from \$652 to \$252 — since 2005 in Santa Clara, San Mateo and San Benito counties

- Although a few cities, including Palo Alto, have raised solar fees, at least 59 of the 131 city and county governments between Sacramento and Santa Cruz have reduced fees during the past two years, some from more than \$1,000 down to a few hundred dollars.

- Fourteen jurisdictions now hand out building permits for solar power to homeowners for free. Two years ago, none did. Berkeley cut fees to zero from \$261 in October. In June, Foster City did the same, followed by Belmont, and then Monte Sereno on Aug. 7.

- Meanwhile, cities including San Jose, Walnut Creek and Novato have streamlined their rules so much that their planning departments now issue most permits in a few minutes, a process that once took weeks.

"A lot of mayors and city leaders want to do their part. They are concerned about global warming," said Kurt Newick, chairman of the energy committee for the Sierra Club's Loma Prieta chapter, which encompasses Santa Clara, San Mateo and San Benito counties.

"They really want to have more solar power in their cities; that's what I think the reason is."

The findings are part of an exhaustive survey completed this week by Newick, a Campbell resident who works for Horizon Energy Systems, a San Jose solar company, and other Sierra Club volunteers.

Members of the Sierra Club's Loma Prieta chapter, based in Palo Alto, sent e-mails to planning departments asking how much it would cost for permits to install a typical home solar system. They chose a \$27,000 system that would generate three kilowatts of electricity.

Their first survey of 40 cities, in fall 2005, found fees for the same permit ranging from \$1,620 in Millbrae to \$95 in Saratoga. News coverage, coupled with pressure from local residents and follow-up surveys, has done the trick, Newick said.

"The costs are coming down," he said. "Most city leaders have looked at their fees and were shocked, and they made the change."

Still, wide variations remain.

The most recent survey, done in June and July, found that Winters, a small town in Yolo County near the University of California, Davis, charges the most of any of the 131 cities and county governments in Northern California — \$1,298 for a standard residential solar permit. By comparison, the average of all 131 jurisdictions was \$282. San Jose was at \$236, Oakland at \$199, Santa Cruz at \$136.

"Boy, we really look bad. It is kind of embarrassing," said John Donlevy Jr., Winters' city manager. "But we're going through a complete review of all of our fees, and we'll be lowering it."

Donlevy said his city of 6,875 people is hardly anti-environment. The city council recently required that half of the 600 homes approved to be built there during the next seven years be equipped with solar panels.

"We're a small town. We've got a small staff," he said. "We're getting there. The fees are definitely going to come down."

In Monte Sereno, with just 4,000 residents, City Manager Brian Loventhal recommended that his city council members drop the town's \$411 solar fee entirely. They agreed last week.

"Essentially what we're doing is subsidizing it. But our council felt it was well worth it," Loventhal said, citing the need to reduce pollution and dependency on fossil fuels.

The survey found that among the 13 counties, city fees in Santa Clara County and San Mateo County each averaged \$255, ranking them fifth, behind San Francisco (\$85), Marin (\$206), San Benito (\$224) and Santa Cruz (\$231). Just below them are Alameda County at \$290 and Contra Costa County at \$301. Last are Napa and Yolo counties, at \$444 at \$445, respectively.

Newick said reviewing plans and sending an inspector to check a typical solar installation takes a few hours at a cost of no more than \$300 — what he says a "reasonable" fee should approximate. In fact, state law bans cities and counties from charging more for any permits — from solar panels to swimming pools — than the permits cost to process.

Some cities have increased solar fees during the past two years, most of them by only a few dollars. Palo Alto's, however, jumped from \$110 in 2005 to \$327 today. The reason? The city wasn't recovering its costs, and now it is, said Larry Perlin, Palo Alto's chief building official.

"I feel comfortable with what our fee is. It's a zero-sum game," he said. "If the fee is taken to zero, then the fee for other permits or services would have to increase to make up for it."

Statewide, solar power installations have been steadily increasing. Among the reasons are that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Million Solar Roofs program pays one-third of the cost for homeowners and that millions of people have seen Al Gore's movie "An Inconvenient Truth" and become more concerned about global warming. Although nobody knows for certain whether lower fees have contributed to the growth, anecdotal evidence says it might, sometimes.

Barry Cinnamon, president of Akeena Solar in Los Gatos, said the fees are rarely deal-breakers. Yet as his business has grown from 12 to 170 employees since 2003, he has met some homeowners for whom the fees really do matter.

"It's not going to mean the difference between doing it or not for most people," he said. "But I have had customers where the permits were \$1,000 or \$2,000, and they said it was the nail in the coffin. They wouldn't do it."

BEING A GREEN MOTHER

Young moms take steps locally to make Earth a better place

By Julia Scott, STAFF WRITER

Tri-Valley Herald, Monday, August 20, 2007

HALF MOON BAY - FIRST it was the cleaning products — stocking the cupboard with vinegar, baking soda and other natural cleaners so that Maya, Melinda MacNaughton's 4-year-old daughter, would be safe if she came into contact with them.

Before long, MacNaughton had begun buying plant-based detergents and purchased a low-emissions car. She built a worm compost pile and started an organic backyard garden, the better to feed her family with food grown chemical-free.

MacNaughton isn't perfect, but she's trying to maintain a safe, healthy and conservation-oriented household in what many say is a world of glutinous packaging, dangerous chemicals and cheap disposables.

And she isn't alone.

In 2005, MacNaughton reached out to local mothers' listserv to find out whether anyone else was worried about raising their children amid such conditions. The enthusiastic response she received led to the birth of the Green Moms, a Coastside support group of like-minded young mothers who swap tips, books and URLs on "green" resources for their homes and lifestyles.

"When I had kids, it changed my mind-set on the world. It kind of binds you to the world a little bit. You think about what's going to be left for them, and for your grandchildren. You want to protect your child's future," said MacNaughton, who moved to El Granada six years ago.

Being mothers, MacNaughton and her friends are very practical. At their most recent monthly meeting, held last Tuesday on the back patio of the Half Moon Bay Inn, eight Green Moms used their time to fill up empty spray bottles they had brought with them, tipping in equal portions of vinegar and water to make a natural cleaning solution for windows and tabletops.

One mother came with a question about how to make chemical-free furniture cleaner and dove into a book another mother brought on homemade household cleaners. Someone else offered tips on where to buy stainless-steel travel coffee mugs small enough to fit in a car's cup holder.

They planned two future field trips — one to a group member's home for a tutorial on cooking healthy, vegetarian fare; another to pick apples with their kids.

In previous months, the Green Moms have attended a lecture on how to stop receiving junk mail at home and have gotten together at Christmas to sew homemade gift bags to wrap presents with instead of disposable wrapping paper.

Kelly Rogers of El Granada told the group that one of her biggest everyday challenges was keeping disposable waste to a minimum.

"I am appalled at how much plastic is used in packaging — you can't get away from it," she said. To set a good example for their two young children, Rogers and her husband maintain five bins at home for different categories of recyclables.

"I've got a 1-year-old and a 3-year-old, and they already know what goes where," she said with pride.

Many of the mothers said they enjoy the get-togethers, because it makes them feel "comfortable," giving them a chance to learn from each other without the pressure of having to showcase a flawless set of "green" credentials.

"I'm a good example of the person who used to throw away paper bags," confessed Amy Fothergill, a mother from Half Moon Bay, to knowing chuckles. "I'm not perfect — I still drive an SUV, I'm sorry — but I'm using cloth bags to shop now," she said. "One step at a time, right?"

"Right," chorused the other moms.

To join the Green Moms listserv, visit groups.yahoo.com/group/greenmommies.

California Air Resources board chair owns stocks in 13 energy firms

Matthew Yi, Chronicle Sacramento Bureau
S.F. Chronicle, Saturday, August 18, 2007

Sacramento - -- The new chairwoman of the California Air Resources Board owns stocks in several oil, coal and utility firms, some of which are likely to be affected by rules the agency implements as part of the state's groundbreaking law to fight global warming, The Chronicle has learned.

Mary Nichols' stock holdings include shares in oil giants Chevron Corp., BP PLC and Royal Dutch Shell, as well as a stake in a Bermuda tanker company that transports crude oil, according to economic interest statements she filed this week.

She also owns stock in the world's largest coal company, Peabody Energy Corp., along with utilities including Edison International, whose subsidiary, Southern California Edison, serves most of the Southern California electricity market.

In total, she and her husband, John Daum, an attorney who represents Exxon in the ongoing Exxon Valdez oil-spill case, have a financial stake in 13 energy-related firms in a diversified stock portfolio that contains 84 companies, according to statements she filed on Tuesday with the state Fair Political Practices Commission.

The air board is expected to consider wide-ranging regulations that will affect what kind of fuel motorists pump into their vehicles and help dictate what sources of energy utility companies can use to generate electricity.

Nichols told The Chronicle this week that she realized there would be a conflict of interest when she filled out the economic disclosure form shortly after Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced her appointment on July 3. But rather than divest holdings, she said she plans to put her investments in a blind trust and to have that in place before the next air board meeting, which is set for Sept. 27.

"I think it's a wise policy for regulators to divest themselves from holdings in companies that they regulate," said Sierra Club lobbyist Bill Magavern. "It's important to avoid any conflict of interest, and it's important to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest."

In late July, however, Nichols presided over two days of board meetings, one of which resulted in the adoption of regulations to limit emissions from off-road diesel vehicles such as construction equipment.

She said she didn't believe her stock holdings in oil companies were in conflict with her action because the regulations affect construction equipment owners and not fuel companies.

But air board spokesman Leo Kay said Friday that the agency's general counsel office is "considering that issue as we speak." The general counsel was unaware of Nichols' stock ownership until a Chronicle reporter called Thursday afternoon to ask about her potential conflict of interest.

This is not the first time Nichols has disclosed extensive stock holdings while working in government. She owned shares in Chevron, Valero Energy Corp., Enron Corp. and other energy firms when she served as Resources Agency secretary under then-Gov. Gray Davis and sat on the California Coastal Commission as a Davis appointee before his recall in 2003.

Nichols said there was no reason to set up a blind trust at that time because she believed there was no conflict as secretary of the resources agency because her job was to advise the governor rather than make policy or regulatory decisions. On the Coastal Commission, it was easy to recuse herself from matters because the commission's actions usually affected individual companies, she said.

"But at the Air Resources Board, we rarely pass a rule that affects just one company," she said. "And with the new responsibility of implementing AB32, we will likely develop regulations that likely will affect every single sector."

That's why she believes setting up a blind trust is the prudent option at this time, Nichols said. Blind trusts have been a method of choice for handling personal investments for some public officials, including Schwarzenegger.

Five of the stock ownerships she disclosed in her recent statements, including the Chevron stock, are worth between \$100,001 and \$1 million each, and 78 of them are each worth between \$10,001 and \$100,000, according to the disclosure filing. The fair market value and nature of investment for a banking firm was not included in her statement.

"This is family money, and it's a joint decision (between my husband and me), and the decision is to invest it for the best long-term yield for us and our family," Nichols said.

Some state Capitol observers were surprised that Nichols, who is highly regarded in the environmental community as a longtime environmental lawyer who served on the air board three decades ago under then-Gov. Jerry Brown, would own shares in oil and coal firms.

"My perception is that she is a living legend in the environmental community, and I would have bet that she would have a greener portfolio," said Barbara O'Connor, director of Sacramento State University's Institute for the Study of Politics and the Media.

John Pitney Jr., political science professor at Claremont McKenna College, said that while not every public official's personal finances should be raised as an issue, higher profile positions do matter at least in public perception and a chairmanship on the state air board is one of them.

The air board's responsibility to implement AB32 has elevated the agency's status, and it came under scrutiny this summer when Schwarzenegger fired then-chairman Robert Sawyer after he tried to enact more pollution-saving measures than the three approved by the governor's staff.

Sawyer's firing was followed by the resignation of the air board's executive director, placing the agency in further turmoil and causing Democratic lawmakers and environmental groups to question the governor's commitment to fight global warming. Within a week, Schwarzenegger announced Nichols as Sawyer's replacement, drawing praise from those same critics.

Her appointment requires confirmation by the state Senate, which has a year to make that decision.

Andrew LaMar, a spokesman for state Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, who chairs the rules committee, said the committee "will take a look at her holdings in vetting her appointment as the chair of the Air Resources Board."

While he said it is encouraging that Nichols is considering creating a blind trust, LaMar said the "public has a right to know what the financial interests are for officials who are representing them."

Cars Stay Away But Beijing Smog Remains

By REUTERS

In the N.Y. Times, Monday, August 20, 2007

BEIJING (Reuters) - Traffic flowed more smoothly but the sun was still shrouded by smog on Monday, the fourth and final day of Beijing's Olympic pollution prevention test.

To see if the city's poor air quality could be improved at least temporarily during next August's Games, the Chinese capital has taken up to 1.3 million cars off the roads by banning number plates ending in odd and even numbers on alternate days.

State media proclaimed the exercise a success, with the Xinhua news agency claiming late on Monday that the city had four "blue-sky days." But the skies -- and some athletes -- suggested a mixed verdict.

Seoul used similar traffic control measures when it hosted the Olympics in 1988, and Athens battled its pollution problem with the same tactics for more than a decade before it held the Games in 2004.

Pollution remains the main concern for organisers of the Beijing Games. Olympics chief Jacques Rogge said two weeks ago that some endurance events might have to be postponed if air quality was not up to scratch.

One such event is the 174-km (108-mile) cycling road race, and some of the world's top cyclists were in Beijing over the weekend for a test event.

Despite taking more than a third of Beijing's cars off the roads and a race course that took in the less polluted climes around the Great Wall, there were clearly respiratory issues for some competitors.

"I have a sore throat and lungs but unless we get everyone to stop driving for a month I guess there is not a lot we can do about it," Tour de France runner-up Cadel Evans told Australia's Sunday Telegraph after the road race.

Official air quality reports over the four days of car restrictions gave Grade 2 ratings on the National Scale of 1 to 5, with the major pollutant cited as large particulate matter. Grade 1 denotes "excellent" air quality and Grade 2 "fairly good."

UNFAVOURABLE

Beijing's Environmental Protection monitoring centre said the still, humid weather over the weekend had been unfavorable for "emission diffusion."

"The vehicle emissions such as nitrogen dioxide have been reduced continually over these days," monitoring centre Vice Director Zhao Yue told the bureau's official Web site (www.bjepb.gov.cn) on Sunday.

"If there had been no restrictions, the air quality would have worsened within one or two days but today it remained Grade 2. In this way the restriction showed an obvious effect on the air quality."

Some athletes and coaches, however, are concerned that China's pollution ratings do not take into account smaller particulate matter and ozone, both of which can have an adverse impact on the human body.

Beijing spent 120 billion yuan (\$15.80 billion) from 1998 to 2006 on environmental improvement -- shutting down or moving the worst industrial polluters, taking old vehicles off the roads and extending the city's rail and subway network.

The number of people taking the city's subway was 200,000 more than the usual average on the four days, Xinhua reported. And the city doubled the number of traffic police on patrol to 6,000 to make sure drivers behaved.

Bicycles have been more in evidence on the streets over the four days of the test and Xinhua news agency reported on Monday that a Beijing company would make 50,000 bikes available to rent at 230 outlets around the city before the Olympics.

Joining the "pick-up and drop-off" rental scheme will cost 100 yuan (\$13.17) a year, the same amount car owners were fined for driving with the wrong number plate over the last four days.

[Fresno Bee editorial, Friday, August 17, 2007:](#)

EPA affirms valley's air was clean in 2006

The Environmental Protection Agency affirmed a previous ruling that the San Joaquin Valley's air met federal clean air standards last year, saying a temporary spike in particulate pollution could be ignored because it was caused by high winds and construction.

In October, the federal government ruled that the region was no longer plagued with excessive levels of PM-10, tiny particles of airborne smoke, dust and soot that are linked to asthma and heart problems.

Environmental and community groups sued in December, saying the EPA ignored crucial data from air monitors in Bakersfield and Corcoran that showed numerous dust and soot violations.

Temporary bad air readings from those monitors should be excluded from the records because they were caused by high winds and construction that kicked up dust in the valley, the EPA said in a proposed finding released Wednesday.

Local and federal air officials hailed last year's ruling as a major cleanup milestone for the eight-county San Joaquin Valley, which is considered one of the country's most polluted air basins.

The proposed finding released this week will undergo public review, and the agency will make a final decision on the rule by Jan. 31.

In the meantime, plaintiffs including Latino Issues Forum, Medical Advocates for Healthy Air and three chapters of the Sierra Club are awaiting a hearing at the San Francisco-based 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to review the agency's original finding.

[Bakersfield Californian, Monday, Aug.20, 2007:](#)

Antonio: Can ya hear us?

By Dianne Hardisty, Opinion Editor

Last week, *The Californian* urged readers to send e-mails to Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. The good mayor was taking a victory lap after a Los Angeles-based federal judge overturned Kern County's voter-approved Measure E.

The ballot initiative, which voters overwhelmingly passed last year, bans the smearing of sludge onto land in unincorporated areas of Kern County. In effect, it blocked Los Angeles from hauling millions of gallons of its human and industrial waste to Kern County.

Celebrating the ruling which meant Los Angeles could keep using the cheapest way to dump the goo it scrapes from its sewage plants Villaraigosa said he hoped Los Angeles and Kern County officials now could turn their attention to other matters in the "best interest" of residents.

(Hey, Antonio, not having the air we breathe and the water we drink fouled by Los Angeles' stinkin' sludge is in our "best interest.")

He also boasted that Los Angeles tries to be a good neighbor to folks in Kern County with the operation of the city's Green Acres (sludge) Farm near the intersection of I-5 and Highway 119.

If that's what Antonio calls being a "good neighbor," God help his neighbors in Los Angeles.

But maybe Antonio really does think his sludge doesn't stink. Or maybe he really doesn't know what being a "good neighbor" is all about.

So, last week, readers were urged to e-mail the mayor and tell him what they think of his "good neighbor" sludge farm. Several people have reported they sent e-mails to Villaraigosa, only to receive automatic, computer-generated acknowledgements.

While we are certain Mayor Villaraigosa will read all of our e-mails, Betty Jacobs of Bakersfield has given us a good idea.

Betty not only sent her e-mail to the mayor, she sent a copy to *The Californian*. We ask others to do the same. *The Californian* will gather these letters together, print some in the Opinion section and post others on the **HOT LETTERS** blog (www.bakersfield.com).

One way or another, Mayor Villaraigosa will get the message: He's not being a "good neighbor."

Send Villaraigosa e-mails at mayor@lacity.org. Send *The Californian* copies at opinion@bakersfield.com.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Sunday, August 19, 2007:](#)

'Travesty of a meeting'

Stephen Johnson, chief of the Environmental Protection Agency, recently visited Fresno, ostensibly to learn about the Valley's air pollution problems. Incredibly, the media were excluded from this meeting.

The media are charged with reporting the facts to the public, enabling us to make informed decisions. Also excluded were representatives of the public such as the 165 organizations that make up the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, and others whose health is directly adversely affected by the polluted air we breathe. These people were left protesting on the sidewalk.

Apparently Rep. George Radanovich, who scheduled the meeting in a public building, was not interested in providing Mr. Johnson with a balanced perspective. Allowing the protesters inside at the end of the meeting to hand him a list of concerns still effectively muzzled them. Interestingly, Mr. Johnson did have time to meet with agriculture representatives.

Shame on Rep. Radanovich and the others who arranged this travesty of a meeting. Apparently it is up to those clean air advocates who were excluded from the meeting to arrange their own meeting with Mr. Johnson.

Perhaps then he will understand that the air is making our residents sick and causing some to die.

*Ruthann Evans, Local Health Care Coalition
Fresno*