

Merced flag project helping Central Valley fight air pollution

What started as a program just for schools is now at Merced municipal buildings.

By Dhyana Levey

Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, April 16, 2008

The air-quality flag program that began in 2004 at local schools has already spread to other counties and even other states.

On Tuesday, it spread throughout the city of Merced.

A morning flag-raising ceremony waved hello to an air quality awareness tool now standing at the Civic Center on 18th Street.

And more flags will soon be flying at other municipal buildings, such as the Central Police Station at 22nd and M streets, the city's public works yard on Grogan Avenue and the main fire station on 16th Street.

The flags vary in color day by day, depending on the air quality. Green means a good air day, yellow points to moderate air quality and orange says the air is unhealthy for sensitive groups such as asthmatics, children and seniors.

Red means the air is bad for everyone.

"Hopefully, when people see how many red flag days we have, it will call attention to the problem," said Allyson Holman, chairwoman of the Merced/Mariposa County Asthma Coalition, which led the fluttering flag program. "We need to raise awareness about the health impacts of air pollution in the Valley. Hopefully, it will lead to change."

The American Lung Association's 2007 State of the Air report ranked Merced as the sixth-most ozone-polluted city in the nation.

Holman, who is also a health educator at Golden Valley Health Center, joined Mayor Ellie Wooten, Assistant City Manager Bill Cahill, Fire Chief Ken Mitten and other city representatives at Tuesday's launch of the municipal air-quality flags.

Schools in all eight Valley counties already have them, but it's important they are in more locations, Holman said: "When summer's here and school's out, no one sees the flags at the schools. This will pick up on that void."

While a flag at Merced's main fire station hasn't yet been raised, it should be there soon, Mitten said. He appreciates the idea of an air-quality flag at the station because it allows more city locations to support the cause.

"If anyone wants to know what the status is, they can just get that information by driving by," he said.

The Environmental Protection Agency's Air Quality Index measures levels of pollutants in the air. The flag colors correspond to the index levels. A green flag, or clean air day, means the index level is at 50 or less. If the index is above 101, orange flags are unfurled, and people with sensitive conditions should stay inside as much as they can.

"We hope on those unhealthy days, there will be a behavior change," said Melissa Kelly-Ortega, program associate with the Asthma Coalition. "People will think, 'Oh, I'll spend less time outside, I'm going to take public transportation.' Or combine errands so you only take one trip outside instead of five."

She and other advocates say their campaign will be unflagging.

West Park meeting a relatively quiet affair

Written by Jonathan Partridge

Patterson Irrigator, Tuesday, April 15, 2008

MODESTO - Like the silence before the squall, advocates and opponents of the proposed PCCP West Park industrial project gathered Monday at the Doubletree Hotel to learn more about developer Gerry Kamilos' proposal.

The gathering marked the last meeting of a county-appointed Crows Landing Air Facility steering committee before the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors votes Tuesday on whether to move forward with Kamilos' plans.

The advisory group's meeting in January 2007 before a similarly big vote garnered scads of spectators as the steering committee voted in favor of using Dallas-based Hillwood to develop Crows Landing's former naval airfield. Supervisors ultimately voted 3-2 to use West Park instead.

This time around, there was no vote - only polite conversation around a large table following an exposition on the project by West Park consultants.

"The board is not going to listen to the steering committee anyway," said steering committee Chairman Jim DeMartini, also a county supervisor, after the meeting.

DeMartini, who has joined several West Side jurisdictions and officials in criticizing West Park for its size, potential traffic impacts and use of trains, told fellow committee members he nonetheless thought project developers had provided all the information the county had requested.

West Park's plans consist of a 4,800-acre industrial park on and around Crows Landing's 1,527-acre former naval airfield, most of which is now owned by Stanislaus County. A short-haul rail line would connect an "inland port" at the airfield to the Port of Oakland, where goods would be shipped back and forth in containers.

The project received a boost last week when the California Transportation Committee voted to give it \$22.4 million in state infrastructure bond money as matching money for the project's 995-acre first phase.

West Park officials also said there was still much work to be done. If supervisors approve a nonbinding memorandum of understanding and a quarterly progress report next week, Kamilos said consultants will immediately begin work on an environmental impact report and visual standards for the business park. He said he felt much progress had been made, and he thought West Park had showed transparency about its development process toward community members.

"It's been an incredible process," Kamilos said.

Much of West Park's work was on display in the Doubletree's ballroom at Monday's meeting. Steering committee members and other attendees perused booths where they could ask questions of consultants before reconvening for a round-robin session.

Crows Landing farmer and steering committee member Earl Perez told consultants at a display on [air quality](#) and water storage that residents worried about the impact of trains.

He wanted to ensure that West Park's use of trains would actually eliminate trucks from the road as developers had indicated.

Honey Walters, a consultant for the Sacramento-based consulting firm Edaw, said a study commissioned by West Park looked at various factors, such as truck models, to make sure trucks would be removed and not merely replaced. In addition, she said West Park would use electric drayage equipment and have top-notch emissions requirements for trucks.

Consultant D.J. Smith of California Strategies discussed economic aspects of the project, saying West Park's location and its size would make it appealing to businesses.

Smith said West Park mostly would be dependent on firms wishing to export agricultural goods during its first five years, but eventually it expects imports to make up the bulk of the business. He noted that the Port of Oakland is a day closer to Asian markets than Southern California ports.

"When this is really singing, we're going to be matching exports with imports," Smith said.

Wages - averaging \$47,658 a year per employee, according to a new study - would be lower than high-tech wages at Pleasanton's Hacienda Business Park, but its agricultural base would be a good fit for the Central Valley, Smith said.

Issues discussed during the roundtable included infrastructural needs in the town of Crows Landing and an overpass at Las Palmas Avenue and Highway 33.

Committee member Arsenio Mataka expressed concerns that the Patterson overpass is not scheduled for completion until West Park is built out, but Kamilos said that timeline is not set in stone. The developer also made reference to recent comments by Claude Delphia, vice president of West Park opposition group WS-PACE.org, saying that West Park would work to ensure the overpass does not conflict with the city's downtown circle or city parks.

Attendees' opinions about the project generally remained unchanged after the meeting. However, one sentiment everyone seemed to share was anxious anticipation about the outcome of Tuesday's supervisors vote.

"Everything now is a week from ... Tuesday," Delphia said.

Earth Day celebration set for this Saturday

Importance of preserving natural resource acknowledged by organizers

By Corey Pride, Los Banos Enterprise

In the Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, April 16, 2008

An Earth Day celebration will be held at Henry Miller Plaza this weekend thanks to a small group of community members lead by one of Los Baños High School's vice principals.

Jeannie Knapp is being heralded as the lead organizer of the event, which takes place Saturday from 8 a.m. to noon at Henry Miller Plaza. She said it came about after she and a few others discussed ways to acknowledge Earth Day and the importance of conservation. The idea was then taken to city officials who supported the idea.

"In the world we live in each of us can make a difference," Knapp said of preserving the environment.

To illustrate how people can help stretch resources, booths from various agencies will be set up at the plaza. The city's recycling contractor Allied Waste will showcase its three-can system. The city's bike trail will be on display. Merced County's 'The Bus' will have its compressed natural gas vehicle present. The local chapter of Habitat for Humanity will be present. And children will be able to make crafts from recycled products.

"We're not trying to be preachy. We want to have fun," Merced College Los Baños Campus Professor Dr. Brenda Latham said. "I'm not saying we should all walk everywhere. I'm not talking about living in a grass hut somewhere. This is to help people remember what we do has an impact."

Colleen Menefee, a local school board trustee, said she thinks the event will be a fun way to teach people how to re-use recycle and reduce.

Soroptimist Sandy Lemas said she believes there is a "moral obligation" to take care of the planet. Since 2000 soroptimist have lead the city's recycling efforts. This weekend will mark nonprofit's last recycling day. Lemas said she is happy about it.

"We always planned to keep doing recycling until the city took over," she said.

Aside from Allied Waste starting its recycling program in March, there are also a handful of recycling businesses that are in the process of coming to town.

Latham said she hopes the Earth Day celebration will become an annual event in Los Baños. She said there are several environmental issues that impact the Central Valley, including air quality, urban sprawl and loss of agricultural land and animal habitats.

Ashlee Williams of Westside Community Foundation said she is looking forward to the Earth Day event.

"I have attended a dozen Earth Days elsewhere and I learn something new every time," she wrote in an e-mail. "In order to take care of the Earth, we have to start at home. Recycling, energy and water conservation and the use of Earth-friendly products are little things we can do locally that make a big impact globally."

Earth Day began as a movement in the 1960s as people began to become more conscience of environmental concerns. Traditionally recognized April 22, the first official Earth Day celebration took place in America in 1970. The day was marked by people promising to be more accommodating of the environment.

Classic cars let off the hook

New proposal centers on special plates

By Alex Breitler - Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Wednesday, April 16, 2008

SACRAMENTO - Classic car owners caught a break.

Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, has gutted a bill requiring them to get smog checks for their collector cars.

In its place, he presented on Tuesday a license plate bill that would, among other things, distinguish between rarely driven classic cars and gross polluters that are worsening air quality in the San Joaquin Valley.

LEARN MORE

To read both the original and the new versions of the classic car smog check bill, visit www.leginfo.ca.gov.

In a hearing before the state Senate Transportation and Housing Committee, Florez called the new bill a "fair and equitable" agreement that followed lengthy discussions with classic car hobbyists.

"I do appreciate the work the classic car owners have put into this," he said.

Those hobbyists were outraged when Florez's initial version of the bill called for smog checks for all vehicles built before 1976 and registered in the Valley. It'd be difficult for many of these cars to pass because they've been rebuilt, collectors argued. Original parts needed to pass a smog check would be difficult to find.

"All us car buffs, we want clean air," said Fred Evenson of Bakersfield, president of the Association of California Car Clubs. "What the (new) bill does is separate the hobby cars from the general cars."

Florez spokeswoman Jennifer Hanson said the new bill is part of a two-step process - determining what a classic car is and then working on the smog check rule.

Clean-air advocates have said they generally support expanding the smog check but that they didn't know how much pollution could be cut if the program is expanded to older cars.

Florez's new proposal, Senate Bill 1549, requires the Department of Motor Vehicles to evaluate whether to allow vehicles as recent as 1976 to carry special year-of-manufacture license plates. The license plates would distinguish classic vehicles from non-classic.

SoCal air regulators blame factory for spewing carcinogen

The Associated Press

in the Tri-Valley Herald, Sacramento Bee and Modesto Bee, Wednesday, April 16, 2008

RIVERSIDE, Calif. -- Regional air regulators have found that a cement factory near Riverside is releasing high levels of a toxic carcinogen - the same cancer-causing contaminant featured in the movie "Erin Brockovich."

The hexavalent chromium-laced dust has been blowing downwind from big outdoor piles across an industrial area and residential community. Months of sampling and lab work showed the dust was coming from TXI Riverside Cement in the Rubidoux area, said Barry Wallerstein, chief executive of the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

"We're not aware of any previous reports that a cement factory would have this level of hexavalent chromium-related risk, but the fact of the matter is we have sampled downwind of the facility, we've sampled upwind of the facility, we cross-checked and did backward calculations using air quality modeling, and it's our best professional opinion that this is coming from the Riverside cement plant," said Wallerstein.

A TXI official, however, said the company's plant had not officially been identified as the source of the emissions. According to state law the factory's owners would be required to notify the public of the emissions and take steps to mitigate them.

"I think the key here is verification," said Frank Sheets, a spokesman for TXI Riverside Cement. "They're making an assumption, we believe at this point in time, that we're the source of that high concentration, and we need to go through a verification process, to verify their findings."

Studies show that long-term exposure to hexavalent chromium or chromium 6, a toxic metal used in metal plating, the aerospace industry and dye manufacturing, has been linked to cancer. The carcinogen was at the center of a drinking-water contamination case in the town of Hinkley that was made famous by the film "Erin Brockovich."

Wallerstein said he did not know how long the factory had been emitting the carcinogenic dust, but that his staff had first become aware of a potential problem in November. The levels found across the street from the plant are 10 times higher than typical amounts found in air, he said.

Long-term exposure to those levels could lead to an additional 480 cases of cancer in 1 million people, officials said.

Bush plans target to stop greenhouse gas emission growth

By H. JOSEF HEBERT and DEB RIECHMANN, Associated Press Writers

Modesto Bee, Merced Sun-Star, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Wed., April 16, 2008

WASHINGTON — Revising his stance on global warming, President Bush will propose a new target for stopping the growth of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions by 2025.

The president also will call Wednesday for putting the brakes on greenhouse gas emissions from electric power plants within 10 to 15 years, according to a senior administration official familiar with the afternoon speech Bush will deliver in the Rose Garden.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity in advance of the speech.

Bush is not going to outline a specific proposal, but he'll lay out a strategy for "realistic" emission reduction targets and "principles" he thinks Congress should follow in crafting global warming legislation.

The new goal for curtailing greenhouse gas emissions is an attempt to short-circuit what White House aides call a potential regulatory "train wreck" if Congress doesn't act on climate change. The president's speech is aimed at shaping the debate on global warming in favor of solving the problem while avoiding heavy costs to industry and the economy.

The Bush administration has been a staunch opponent of a mandatory so-called "cap-and-trade" approach to reducing greenhouse gases. While it has backed some mandatory programs, it has preferred largely voluntary measures to broadly address global warming. In his speech, however, the president will not slam the door on discussing market-based approaches to stem the rise in greenhouse gas emissions.

"We aren't necessarily against cap-and-trade proposals," White House press secretary Dana Perino said earlier this week. But she added quickly, "What we've seen so far from Congress is not something that we can support."

The president remains opposed to a Senate bill that would require mandatory caps on greenhouse gas emissions, calling that proposal unrealistic and economically harmful, Perino said.

Bush will speak forcefully about concerns he has over a possible rush to address the Earth's warming through a hodgepodge of regulations under existing federal laws such as the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act.

Senior White House officials last week told a group of conservative Republican lawmakers in a private meeting that the administration wants Congress to act on climate change to avoid regulating carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping - or greenhouse - gases under existing laws.

Perino says the administration is concerned about a potential regulatory "train wreck" as a result of climate-related court rulings.

"Recent court decisions hold the very real prospect that the federal government will regulate greenhouse gas emissions with or without a new law being passed," Perino said. "To us, having unelected bureaucrats regulating greenhouse gases at the direction of unelected judges is not the proper way to address the issue."

Several of the conservative GOP lawmakers who heard the White House presentation last week said they viewed it as a move toward endorsing a limited type of "cap-and-trade" emissions reduction proposal, targeting power plants, and a reversal of long-standing administration climate policy.

The new White House climate initiative comes as Bush appears, in the view of congressional Democrats and environmentalists, as increasingly irrelevant in the climate debate both on the domestic and international stage.

All three presidential candidates - Democratic Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama and Republican Sen. John McCain - favor a more aggressive program on climate change than does Bush, all supporting mandatory limits on greenhouse gases.

Senate Democratic leaders plan to begin debate in June on legislation that would cap greenhouse gases and allow polluters to ease some of the cost by buying emissions credits. This cap-and-trade approach is aimed at cutting the emissions by 70 percent by mid-century. The House also is moving toward considering a cap-and-trade proposal. And many industry lobbyists have become resigned to some type of cap-and-trade proposal moving forward, if not this year probably next, and are trying to find ways to limit the damage.

"The key is whether the president supports a mandatory cap on emissions," said Tony Kreindler, a climate specialist at the advocacy group Environmental Defense. "You never achieve any real reductions in pollution without legal limits. That's what we're going to be looking for."

Meanwhile, many environmentalists maintain that the congressional debate may be overtaken by the courts - the same prospect the White House is fretting over.

The Environmental Protection Agency already is under orders from the Supreme Court to determine whether carbon dioxide is endangering public health or welfare. If so, the court said, the EPA must regulate CO2 emissions.

Carbon dioxide is the leading greenhouse gas, so named because its accumulation in the atmosphere can help trap heat from the sun, causing potentially dangerous warming of the planet.

At the same time, the Interior Department has been told by another court to decide whether the polar bear should be brought under the protection of the Endangered Species Act because of disappearing sea ice - a phenomenon blamed by scientists on global warming.

While senior Bush administration officials were traveling to Paris this week to join a discussion with other countries about what actions to take on global warming, many foreign negotiators involved in such talks are increasingly looking ahead, knowing that likely the next administration will take the most decisive steps on U.S. climate policy.

The United States and other countries agreed at a meeting in December in Bali, Indonesia, to work to set firm targets for reducing greenhouse emissions by the end of 2009, as a follow-up to the Kyoto reduction targets that expire in 2012.

Bush to Endorse 'Intermediate' Emissions Goal

By Dan Eggen Washington Post Staff Writer

Washington Post Wednesday, April 16, 2008

President Bush will endorse an "intermediate goal" today for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but he will not put forward any specific legislation or proposal on how the goal should be met, White House officials said.

In an afternoon address in the Rose Garden, Bush will also reiterate his long-standing opposition to mandatory emissions regulations without simultaneous agreements from large developing nations such as India and China, officials said.

"The president will announce tomorrow an intermediate goal that will lead to a long-term goal" through ongoing negotiations on global climate change, said White House spokesman Tony Fratto.

White House officials declined to release more details yesterday. But Bush's announcement appears unlikely to contain much in the way of new proposals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, according to environmental advocates and industry representatives.

Bush has long made clear that he does not support mandatory reductions without similar cuts in developing nations, and he objects to proposals on Capitol Hill to create a mandatory system for reducing the greenhouse gases that are a major cause of climate change.

"This basically sounds like the same quarterback calling the same play," said Daniel J. Weiss, director of climate strategy at the Center for American Progress a liberal think tank. "It's just another way of Bush saying no."

But Scott Segal, a lobbyist and director of the Electric Reliability Coordinating Council, which represents power companies, said Bush's address appears to be aimed at sending a signal to Congress that the administration wants a role in the greenhouse gas debate.

"It doesn't come as any surprise that the executive branch would want to become more actively involved on legislation involving climate change," he said.

Bush's address will come on the eve of a round of international climate-change negotiations in Paris on Thursday and Friday. Administration officials spent the past week briefing congressional Republicans and industry representatives on their plans, signaling that they feel pressure to take action in light of a year-old Supreme Court decision directing the Environmental Protection Agency to determine whether carbon dioxide emissions endanger public health and welfare.

In a little-noticed speech in Detroit on Monday, an EPA official indicated that the Bush administration is not likely to regulate carbon dioxide. Margo Oge, who heads the EPA's office of transportation and air quality, told reporters it is "not realistic" for her agency to decide whether to regulate greenhouse gases by the end of Bush's term, according to the Associated Press.

Worsening smog led to today's regulation

By Melissa Evans, Staff Writer

L.A. Daily News, Wednesday, April 16, 2008

The burnt haze choking the Los Angeles basin during the balmy summers of the 1940s and 1950s was annoying at best, a deadly health hazard at worst.

Old photos show pedestrians scurrying the streets trying not to breathe too deep, covering their faces and squinting their eyes shut. A comical picture taken in 1954 shows a group of suited men sitting around a table at a classy luncheon wearing gas masks.

The man-made muck polluting the air inspired a host of creative solutions - some a bit comical given today's knowledge of smog - but, more importantly, empowered the first air quality district in the country some 60 years ago.

"Los Angeles was seeing tremendous growth during that time," said Sam Atwood, spokesman for the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which has taken many incarnations over the years but remains the oldest agency of its kind in the nation. "More people means more vehicles, more traffic and more sources of air pollution."

The problem of air quality still lingers, and environmental regulation remains a politically tense topic. The state of California is now in a legal battle with the federal government over strict new regulations passed here to regulate greenhouse gases emitted from cars.

Officials at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach are still hammering out tenants of a clean air action plan they hope will reduce diesel truck emissions in the Harbor Area.

But those involved in the battle over smog agree that Los Angeles has made great strides, and has earned a reputation as being a leader in the nation.

In a way, it had no choice.

The geographic and climactic characteristics of Los Angeles, along with its early industrial boom, contributed to untenable air quality in the 1940s and 1950s. Compounding matters, Los Angeles and its surrounding cities were already home to millions of people, and officials immediately worried about health effects after a "killer fog" in London led to 4,000 deaths in 1952.

A headline in the Daily Breeze on Sept. 13, 1955, screamed: "L.A. Smog Attack Worse in History." During a 14-day heat wave, the city had reached another "stage one" alert, meaning the fine particulates in the air climbed to noxious levels.

Conditions got so bad that officials at the Monrovia airport reportedly considered moving the airfield as a result of poor visibility.

In 1943, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors appointed a "smoke and fumes commission," banned emissions of dense smoke and established an office of Director of Air Pollution Control. Most of those early regulations, however, lacked teeth.

A few years later in 1947, despite stiff opposition from oil companies and the Chamber of Commerce, the county created the first air quality management district.

Scientists were just beginning to understand what causes smog, why it was so rampant in Los Angeles and what could be done about it.

Until then, outlandish ideas to solve the problem included installing giant fans in the mountains to blow the smog out, and tearing a hole in the atmospheric inversion layer that traps smog by firing cannons from Mount Wilson. One scientist suggested seeding clouds to produce cleansing rain, another determined that the Los Angeles basin was just not a suitable place to live.

But, instead of moving everybody out, the new district - made up of scientists and policymakers - recommended strict controls on vapor leaks from refineries and fueling operations, regulations on automobile exhaust, banning open burning of trash and the creation of a rapid transit system.

"It's a very striking success story when you look at the fact that the population of Los Angeles has tripled since the late 1950s, the number of cars has quadrupled, and pollution has come down about 80 percent," Atwood said.

Many of those regulations remain in place, and have set the stage for federal laws clamping down on smog. Los Angeles still has a lot of work to do to meet stricter guidelines by a deadline of 2023 - the city recorded 68 days of smog last year that exceeded federal standards - but the days of gas masks and wilted plants are a part of the past.

"We have a lot of work to do," Atwood said, "but we have a lot to be proud of."

Tesla: Little electric roadster that could

By Chris Woodyard

USA TODAY, Wednesday, April 16, 2008

SAN CARLOS, Calif. - A little roadster that goes into regular production in two weeks is already electrifying the auto industry.

It's not about promises that the Tesla will deliver pin-you-back-in-your-seat acceleration - 0 to 60 miles per hour in a Ferrari-like 3.9 seconds - or its sexy appearance.

Tesla's groundbreaking distinction is under its carbon-fiber skin. The \$98,000 Tesla is the first production high-performance electric car. It is powered entirely by electricity, a plug-in that will never use a drop of gasoline. And it's billed as being able to go 221 miles in mixed city/highway driving on a full battery charge.

The sports car from San Carlos-based Tesla Motors has European sex appeal with power to match that defies the image of electric vehicles as poky carts for golf courses or senior villages.

Tesla is being touted as the first of a wave of electric cars that will bring the most profound change in the auto industry since the first Model T rolled off Ford Motor's (F) assembly line 100 years ago. From Toyota (TM) to General Motors, (GM) the quest for clean air and independence from foreign oil is leading to the wall socket.

"It's in the vanguard of the electric car revolution that is coming," proclaims Elon Musk, the digital-age tycoon who is Tesla Motors chairman and largest shareholder of Tesla Motors.

Critics, however, say Tesla's high price, exotic battery technology and lack of onboard backup power mean it will remain a niche vehicle.

Even consumers who can afford one may be spooked by the car's limited range. Unlike hybrids, it has no gas engine as a backup.

"If you run out of juice, you're dead in the water," warns Dick Messer, executive director of the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, which ordered a Tesla roadster for display, then canceled.

A lot is riding on the launch: A Tesla flop could short-circuit the electric-car revolution. Fans already have been disquieted by a six-month production delay and internal troubles, including a public spat between Musk and former CEO Martin Eberhard that has played out over Internet blogs.

Yet the fundamental idea remains compelling: to build a car without the compromises usually made with alternative-fuel vehicles. The car is intended to be the top-performing sports car in its pricey bracket - and one which just happens to run on electricity.

"Tesla is out front in timing and in dispelling all the myths, building a car that shatters every stereotype of what an electric car is," says Chelsea Sexton of Plug In America, a Los Angeles-based electric-vehicle advocacy group.

A Silicon Valley start-up

Tesla has taken root in a pair of industrial buildings south of San Francisco. The car's engineers and computer nerds are grounded far more in the entrepreneurial ethos of Silicon Valley than in Detroit - and they showed it with a creative solution to their greatest technical problem.

From the start, it was clear that the big technological hurdle was to develop a safe, reliable, reasonably priced battery that can deliver longer ranges than the nickel-metal hydride units in today's gas-electric hybrids. That meant lithium-ion technology, such as typically used for laptop batteries.

While big automakers also are trying to develop their own electric drivetrains, Tesla's engineers figured out a shortcut in the process.

Rather than design a new battery from scratch, they made the roadster's energy-storage system a multitude of rechargeable laptop computer battery cells - 6,831 per car - arranged in a half-ton block that's catacombed with cooling channels. Each cell is a little bigger than a AA battery, virtually identical to the few lithium-ion cells that power the IBM ThinkPad on which this story was written.

The battery pack is designed to last more than 100,000 miles and operate in weather extremes, says JB Straubel, Tesla's chief technology officer.

With today's gasoline prices and environmental concerns, major automakers from Toyota to Mercedes-Benz have become serious about electric power. General Motors' Volt performance electric car is due in 2010.

Tesla is the upstart. Deciding five years ago to try to independently develop a performance electric car was a gutsy move. At the time that Eberhard and his small group began, gas was cheap, and venture capital was still recovering from the tech-stock meltdown.

In the beginning

They created Tesla Motors, which takes its name from the inventor who pioneered alternating electrical current and AC electric motors more than a century ago.

The fledgling company's finances were boosted by the involvement of Musk, who made his fortune creating the PayPal ([EBAY](#)) online payment system now owned by eBay. He was hooked on the potential by taking a spin in a test electric sports car from another maker.

Musk, Tesla's chairman, says he has provided almost half of the \$145 million that Tesla Motors has raised, including a big stake in the latest \$40 million in financing (and he has enough left to be developing his own rocket company).

The engineering team started by trying to modify a small model from British sports-car maker Lotus to handle Tesla's evolving electric drivetrain.

After all the development work, about the only components that a Tesla and a Lotus now share are the windshield, steering wheel and instrument panel - 6.5% of the parts, says marketing Vice President Darryl Stry.

And Tesla's building operation is truly an international affair. The battery cells come from Japan, the 248-horsepower motor arrives from Taiwan, chassis are made at Lotus' factory in England and final assembly will take place in California. Up to 400 are expected to arrive this year; up to 1,800 next year.

Eagerly awaiting them are more than 600 buyers for the 2008 model who have already deposited anywhere from \$50,000 to full price for their new car. An additional 300 are on the list for 2009 models.

New Teslas were to start arriving last year. But the project encountered roadblocks and unanticipated expenses along the way in designing an up-to-date body.

Redesigning the headlights to not look so bug-eyed cost more than \$600,000. The door sills were dropped 2 inches lower than they are on a Lotus to make the car easier to enter and exit.

The biggest hurdle, however, has been the transmission. Much time was spent trying to develop a two-speed transmission. Now, Tesla engineers are going back to a single-speed design.

Even with the production date so close, little changes keep coming. Musk ordered a change in the seats because he decided they weren't comfy enough.

Growing pains spark turmoil

Such costly changes, along with growth that has pushed companywide employment from 50 less than two years ago to 250 today has increased internal friction and led to a falling out between Musk and Eberhard.

Late last year, Eberhard quit. He also set up a blog, www.teslafounders.com, in which he posted entries critical of the company. One lambasted the company for a "bloodbath" in which 26 employees were dismissed.

Though he's pulled down some posts under threat of a lawsuit, "I don't agree with some of the decisions that the company has made recently," Eberhard said in an interview.

Musk says Eberhard is "obviously disgruntled," and his "blogging has been harmful. It has disparaged the company in a way that wasn't true." He says the company under Eberhard was racked by spiraling development costs.

Eberhard counters that he was denied the ability to hire financial executives who could have kept a tighter rein on costs.

Eberhard was replaced as CEO by veteran technology executive Ze'ev Drori, who calls Tesla his "most exciting" challenge.

After official production of the Tesla starts March 17, the company hopes to add more models. "We're trying to build a company that has a long future," Straubel says.

An electric sedan that would sell for about half the price of the roadster is in the works. Production is scheduled to start in 2010, in time to rival GM's Volt.

The company is also trying to market its electric drivetrain to other automakers pursuing alternative technologies.

Big makers get turned on

No doubt about it, there's plenty of interest among big automakers. Chrysler just showed off an electric-powered concept car in Detroit in January. Ford and Toyota are pushing ahead with tests of plug-in electric hybrids - vehicles that would run solely on a plug-in battery charge part of the time. Mercedes-Benz recently announced it will be one of the first makers to use lithium-ion batteries in its hybrids.

The prospect of such hulking potential competition has given added fuel to Tesla doubters.

Museum director Messer says continuing changes to the car, remaining questions about battery reliability and performance and the company's long-term financial viability are all factors that buyers should consider.

"It's a fun, look-at-me car," Messer says. But "If GM and Chrysler can't make it, it's tough to see how (Tesla) will make it."

Dave Cole of the Center for Automotive Research in Ann Arbor, Mich., calls Tesla a "fun aside" to the overall progress of the auto industry.

Cole says that though it's too expensive to capture mainstream buyers, the electric roadster will at least serve as a way station on the march to a leap forward in technology.

Tesla "serves notice we're entering a new era," Cole says.

Living with the white dust

Riverside-area cement plant's neighbors react to news about toxic carcinogen in the air.

By Janet Wilson, staff writer

L.A. Times, Wed., April 15, 2008

The air above the TXI Riverside Cement Plant was blinding white Tuesday, blocking out the blue sky. For as long as Mary Alfonso, 79, can remember, dust from the factory has been a feature of life on "the Hill" just above it.

When she and her husband moved to the neighborhood near the border of Riverside and San Bernardino counties 52 years ago, they joked about its uniqueness because all the roofs were white.

"Then my car turned white -- and it started out green!" said Alfonso.

The dust was annoying, and people in the neighborhood assumed it wasn't good for them. But despite complaints over the years, they said, no one ever cleaned it up completely.

On Tuesday, residents of "the Hill" learned that the South Coast Air Quality Management District had found high levels of hexavalent chromium, a toxic carcinogen, in dust blowing from the outdoor "clinker piles" of the century-old plant in the Rubidoux area. And to add insult to injury, no officials had notified them.

"It would be nice if they even told us there was a problem," Alfonso said as she leaned on her cane outside her neat stucco home.

The high hexavalent chromium levels, revealed Monday in The Times, were first detected by staff from the AQMD in January. But AQMD executive officer Barry Wallerstein said it would have been irresponsible to notify neighbors of hazardous emissions then, before the agency had pinned down the cement plant as the source.

He said that he and his staff would provide full details of their investigation at a community meeting next week and that the agency was preparing multiple citations against the plant for violation of dust control and air pollution regulations, which should be issued by week's end. Under state law, negligent emission of air contaminants is punishable by a fine of up to \$25,000 a day. Higher fines -- up to \$1 million -- can be imposed under the Health and Safety code, for greater degrees of culpability and harm, including deaths.

AQMD staff found that levels of the potent carcinogen were 10 times higher than normal directly behind the plant on the downwind side.

TXI Riverside Cement spokesman Frank Sheets said Tuesday that the company still had not received notification from the AQMD that the factory was the source of the high chromium levels. But, he said, "if residents are concerned, we're concerned."

He said the company would also probably hold a community meeting: "We think it's important to lay out on the table everything the district is claiming, to allay their concerns."

Long-term exposure to hexavalent chromium, also known as chromium 6, in air and drinking water has been linked to cancers in every major organ, to sinus and kidney problems and to other serious diseases.

Chromium 6 was at the core of a case concerning drinking water contamination in Hinkley, Calif., made famous by the movie "Erin Brockovich."

According to state air pollution and health specialists, long-term exposure to hexavalent chromium at the levels the AQMD has found on the other side of the TXI plant from "the Hill" could lead to an additional 480 cases of cancer per million people. Agency officials declined to release any data from the neighborhood.

The toxic metal, widely used in metal plating, the aerospace industry and stainless steel processing, can also be found in rocks and other raw material used in cement production.

Sheets said Tuesday that the piles of clinker dust in the factory yard are shipped in from TXI's Oro Grande plant in the high desert. Residents said the plant used to mine in the local area as well. Half of a misshapen, heavily mined mound still looms above the facility, on the other side from "the Hill," whose official name is Crestmore Heights.

Alfonso's youngest son, Edward, 42, still remembers playing "Tom Sawyer" in the giant runoff hole across the street from the cement plant. "I loved growing up here," he said. "We would get ties from the old railroad track, and make rafts in the water."

He and all his neighbors also drank water provided by the cement company, from a well at the edge of the plant's property. Eight years ago they were told that the water was unsafe to drink because of nitrates, and the water supply was shut down.

Sheets said the company closed the well after being told by authorities that the groundwater supplying it contained unsafe nitrates from fertilizers used by area citrus growers. He said the company had never been told it contained hexavalent chromium. He did not know if it had been tested for that.

Today, Ed Alfonso has renal failure and will be on dialysis for the rest of his life unless he can find a donor for a transplant.

"I was the one who never did drugs, never partied, never drank, and look what happened to me," he said.

Mary Alfonso and other longtime residents said the air quality has actually improved over the decades, thanks to equipment installed at the plant.

Sheets said a state-of-the-art filtration system had been put in decades ago, costing millions, but the improvement most residents probably noticed more occurred when two production lines were shut down in the '70s and '80s.

Socorro Olivas, 77, has lived on "the Hill" for 44 years. Her husband, Manuel, worked at the plant in high school and earned good money.

"But you used to get that burning along the back of your neck, remember?" she said to him Tuesday.

Manuel's father and two uncles also worked there, the couple said. His father died of lung cancer, but he also smoked. Socorro said her brother worked at the plant and had health problems, and her son has asthma.

"We always say there's all this junk in the air, it comes from the air, but we never say where the air comes from," she said.

She said she was angry with AQMD regulators: "We pay their salaries with our taxes, don't we? They should stop protecting this plant and start protecting us, the public."

Across the street, Maria Gonzalez, 63, said she wakes up gasping and choking in the middle of the night. She said she misses her 7-year-old grandson terribly. Her son moved him away after the boy developed serious asthma. Gonzalez said her husband can no longer work because of serious sinus problems.

"From the factory," she said, gesturing to the silos and dirt piles below her quiet street.

"I think the people there, they need to gather all the powder up," she said, making a scooping motion with her hands, then squeezing them shut as if to trap the dust inside. "I love to live here. I want to stay."

[Hanford Sentinel, Letter to the Editor, Tuesday, April 15, 2008:](#)

Lemoore plan is crazy

Editor: What are you doing? It is very difficult to believe that the Lemoore City Council is in favor of allowing development of land under the Lemoore NAS flight paths!

As a retired naval aviator I have seen this same scenario unfold in the past. Let me educate the Lemoore council members as to what will take place.

Whoever purchases/owns the land under the jets' flight path no doubt bought it for a bargain price. After all who would want to live there with the deafening roar of low flying F-18s?

Well, times change and now with the price of land so high (even at today's reduced prices) a hefty profit can be made by developing the property. A little political pressure is applied to the current council members (perhaps in the form of threatened legal action) that persuades them to approve development. After all what harm is there to allow a few homes to be built out there?

Guess what? Because the land was cheap the homes are affordable and it isn't very long before a bunch of homes are under those F-18s. At first the noise was acceptable (the price you pay for an "affordable" house). But now the war is over and a lot of squadrons are back training around the clock.

The homeowners get together and start demanding restrictions on when the F-18s can fly over them. At first they're minor (no late night, weekends, etc.) But it gets worse. They discover that peace and quiet are wonderful! [And what about that pollution?](#) Every morning the pool has a film on it and the cars need to be washed daily! Can it be good breathing that soot all the time?

The last straw happens when an F-18 takes off and sucks in a large bird, destroying an engine. The F-18 returns for an immediate landing -- dumping hundreds of gallons of jet fuel right over all those houses. It happens from time to time ...

Now all those residents don't want any overflight and they muster enough political clout to make it happen. As a result the base shrinks to a mere shell of its former glory. Funny, but the residents

of Fallon, Nev. (who have never allowed development near their base) welcome the influx of more squadrons.

Lemoore NAS has contributed billions of dollars through the years to the local community. Why in the world would the Lemoore City Council want to ever take any action that would even remotely jeopardize that relationship?

I sincerely hope the Lemoore City Council reconsiders allowing any development that would in any way impact the base. The small, temporary monetary gain is nothing compared to the potential long-term losses!

Richard Karwowski, Hanford

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses a cement factory in San Bernardino County is accused of emitting carcinogens into the air. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Acusan a fábrica de cemento en California de esparcir elementos cancerígenos

Manuel Ocaño

Noticiero Latino

Radio Bilingüe, Wednesday, April 16, 2008

Autoridades ambientales del sur de California advirtieron que una fábrica de cemento en el condado de San Bernardino emite una contaminación del aire que incluye elementos cancerígenos.

De acuerdo con la Administración Distrital de Calidad del Aire del Sur e California, la planta T.X.I., en los límites entre los condados de San Bernardino y Riverside, emite altos niveles de cromo hexivalente, que se ha comprobado en laboratorios que produce cáncer.

Ejecutivos de la planta informaron que revisarán las condiciones de producción y almacenaje, pero destacaron que las autoridades ambientales podrían haber asumido sin evidencias de campo.