Mountain House urged to fight plans for nearby power plants

by Justin Lafferty
Tracy Press, Thursday, October 15, 2009

MOUNTAIN HOUSE — Local residents voiced concerns about air pollution Wednesday night over a proposed peaker power plant that would be built on the edge of Alameda County, just a couple miles from Mountain House.

Mountain House resident Bob Anderson, who said he has a doctorate degree in mechanical engineering from Princeton, showed the Community Services District Board of Directors a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation detailing why he thought any proposed power plant was a bad idea.

His two major worries, he said, was that a power plant would lower property values and create more air pollution that would blow east to Mountain House.

Anderson discussed four major power plant permits near the community: East Altamont Energy Center, Mariposa Energy Project, Tracy Combined Cycle Plant and the Tesla Energy Center.

“These are large sources of pollution,” Anderson said. “All of these plants, at least the ones that are close to us, are in Alameda County. They found a nice loophole in the process where they can ask for permission from Alameda County and say, ‘By the way, you’re going to get a whole bunch of money out of this, and the prevailing winds are going to blow into the next county.’”

East Altamont, which has a valid permit, would be a 1,100-megawatt plant and be built about a mile from Mountain House. Mariposa, whose permit is under review, would be a 200 megawatt peaker plant and be built about two miles from Mountain House.

Anderson cited a study, done in July by the University of California, Berkeley that analyzed the effects of all power plant openings nationwide since 1993. The study said that said a large power plant (380 megawatts or more) could decrease local property values by 9.3 percent.

He also noted a study from the California Air Resources Board, which likened exposure to particulate matter from power plants to a non-smoker living with a smoker.

“We need to press these concerns with the state and see how far we can take this,” Anderson said. “The commission will listen to the local people who are affected by this plant development, even if on the technical basis it doesn’t break any laws.”

Bob Sarvey, an air pollution activist and Tracy shoe store owner, told the board that this would also become a financial burden for the district. Sarvey said if there was a fire at the plant, Mountain House would have to call upon and pay for Tracy’s fire department to respond, since it’s the closest town. He said it would take too long for any fire department in Alameda County to come out and take care of a situation.

Sarvey also noted that Mariposa, or any power plant that moves in, should have to use recycled water.

“This board can have a big influence on this project,” Sarvey said. “If you are going to accept this project, you should get involved, because Mountain House is the most affected by this project of all the communities.”

Paula Zagrecki, the director of finance from Diamond Generating Corporation, which has a hand in Mariposa’s development, spoke to debunk some claims made by Anderson and Sarvey. She said that Mariposa would buy air emissions credits in San Joaquin County, not just Alameda County, to help offset whatever damage the plant caused, something she said the company doesn’t legally have to do.

“While we understand that there are issues about air quality, you also should understand that every time you buy a Honda and drive that Honda, you don’t have to mitigate your air emissions,” Zagrecki said. “We do and we’re not just mitigating them in the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, we are mitigating them here because we understand that we are 2.3 miles away from your community and there could be impacts on San Joaquin.”

Zagrecki also said that the creation of Mariposa would generate about $26 million in jobs and supply costs that would mostly be spent in San Joaquin County. She added that Pacific Gas & Electric Co. would only run Mariposa about 600 hours a year.

Replying to Sarvey’s point about recycled water, Zagrecki said Mariposa had no qualms with using it, but she stressed the need for a reliable water source.

The board looked into possibly getting involved in the Mariposa project to at least get any relevant documents, and to send out information to other involved parties as well. Director Jim Lamb was worried about the cost of becoming an intervener, as the district would be responsible for sending out the information, but Sarvey said the board could apply for financial hardship.

Lamb said that any information they receive from a power plant or Alameda County would be posted on the district’s Web site.

Rush to comply with New Year's ban on dirty trucks at Port of Oakland

By Cecily Burt, Oakland Tribune
In the Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Sunday, October 18, 2009

In mid-August Mamdoh Ibrahim was nervous but excited. Since June, the trucker had been wading his way through the application process to get a state grant to buy new air filters for two big rigs his business uses to haul cargo to and from the Port of Oakland.

He wasn't through yet, but he had been assigned a project number, which was a hopeful sign.

But Ibrahim is still waiting. He hasn't received the all-important letter telling him his application has been approved, and he is running out of time.

Tough new state air regulations take effect Jan. 1, and trucks manufactured from 1994 through 2003 that haven't been outfitted with special diesel exhaust filters to cut down on dangerous emissions will not be allowed entry to California ports.

Older trucks will be banned altogether, and truckers who applied for grant money to help purchase new replacement rigs are also in limbo.

A $22 million fund is being used to help 700 to 800 truckers buy the filters, which on average cost $15,000 to $18,000 per truck. The grant covers installation but not sales tax. The fund also is being tapped for up to 200 grants worth $50,000 each, which truckers can put toward the purchase of new rigs.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District is overseeing the retrofit program and processing the grants, with help from the Port of Oakland. At least 2,000 trucks serve the port, according to conservative estimates.

For Ibrahim, who lives in Alameda with his family, the fast-approaching deadline is a terrifying thing.

"They said when everything goes through, they will send us a letter," Ibrahim said Thursday. "I'm not certain whether I'll be able to get (the filters) by the deadline or not. That's why I'm nervous."

What will he do if he doesn't get the grant?

"I have no answer for it," he said helplessly. "They are going to put a lot of people out of work. This is going to affect a lot of people. This is how we make our living. "... It's taking way too long."

Tim Leong, an environmental scientist who works for the port, said it stopped accepting new applications Sept. 10, and now everybody is working as fast as they can to order the parts and get them installed before the New Year's deadline.

It takes on average six to eight weeks to complete the process once an application is approved, but it can take longer. Of the more than 700 retrofit applications approved, only about 200 units have been installed, Leong said.

"November is going to be a very busy month," he said.

Ralph Borrmann, spokesman for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, said the fund will pay for about 150 to 170 new truck replacement grants. The California Air Resources Board has posted a rank list of the grant applications that have been completed.

But the letters authorizing the drivers to execute a contract and order new trucks won't go out until the second or third week of November.

And it can take as long as three months to get a new truck, said Bill Aboudi, operations manager for AB Trucking. Aboudi applied for six new truck grants and several retrofit grants for his fleet but has not gotten a response on any application.

Leong admitted it doesn't give the drivers much time.

"It is cutting it close," Leong said. "But better late than never."

White House aims to clear path for home energy improvements

By Renee Schoof
Sacramento Bee, Monday, October 19, 2009

WASHINGTON – The White House today will release a plan to remove some of the obstacles that prevent middle-class Americans from getting energy audits and making their homes more energy-efficient.

America's nearly 130 million homes generate about 20 percent of the nation's emissions of carbon dioxide, the principal heat-trapping gas, according to a report to be released today by the White House Council on Environmental Quality and Vice President Joe Biden's Middle Class Task Force. McClatchy obtained an early copy.

Biden said the plan would add jobs that couldn't be outsourced and would make it easier for families to save money and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Installing more insulation and more energy-efficient doors, windows, lighting, water heaters, air conditioning and appliances could reduce energy use in a house by as much as 40 percent, meaning considerable monthly savings on utility bills, the report states.

The White House estimates that weatherization also could lower greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 160 million metric tons annually by 2020, but one of the biggest hurdles to greater energy efficiency is cost.

Although retrofits save money on energy bills, they can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, depending on how much work is needed. The new recommendations, which use existing federal funding, include ways to finance projects so homeowners would be more likely to undertake them.

The new program is designed to expand a national energy retrofit market beyond the $5 billion weatherization program for low-income households in this year's economic stimulus package. A family of four that earns less than $44,100 a year, or $55,140 in Alaska and $50,720 in Hawaii, can qualify for the low-income program.

The report suggests three ways to make financing for efficiency improvements more attractive:

- Add the cost of retrofits to a homeowner's property tax bill. If a house were sold, the buyer would continue to pay for the improvements through the tax bill. The costs would be spread out over enough time so that the monthly payments generally would be lower than the savings on utility bills.
- Make energy-efficiency expenses part of the mortgage when a house is bought or refinanced. That program is already available, but the report says there have been "significant barriers" to widespread use. It suggests ways to overcome those barriers, such as making it easier to rate a home's energy performance.
- Expand state revolving loan funds, which help consumers borrow money for weatherization at lower interest rates. These funds are available now in 16 states, and the report recommends expanding them to the other 34.

Fiscal impact of state climate law disputed

By Jim Downing
Sacramento Bee, Monday, October 19, 2009

A local academic has emerged as the leading source of dark forecasts in a recession-fueled debate over whether California's war on global warming will hurt or help its economy.

Sanjay Varshney, dean of the business school at California State University, Sacramento, predicts dire consequences if the state moves forward with plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

His figures – dismissed by some economists – have been cited by business groups and politicians calling on the state to delay carrying out AB 32, the state's landmark climate change law.

In a July paper paid for by the California Small Business Roundtable, an advocacy group, Varshney reported that trimming emissions would cost the average household $3,857 a year, kill more than 1.1 million jobs and cut the state's economic output by nearly 10 percent.

Costs for food, fuel, electricity and housing would all rise, he predicts, driving a 26 percent drop in discretionary spending, slashing tax revenues and squeezing small businesses.

Those figures, the result of Varshney's first venture into environmental policy analysis, have planted him at one of the poles in the climate change debate.

At the other pole are environmental and green-business groups that predict AB 32 will make California more innovative and efficient, driving economic growth and creating jobs.

Varshney's study has been cited by everyone from the San Diego Union Tribune's editorial board to leading industry advocates in Sacramento. Last month, Republican Meg Whitman nodded to Varshney's job numbers as she made postponing AB 32 a key promise in her run for governor.

"We first must get our economy back on track," she wrote in an op-ed in the San Jose Mercury News.

In an interview in his CSUS office, Varshney, 42, a native of India, said he was honored by the mention. He said he supports fighting climate change in concept and doesn't have an agenda.

"The idea was certainly not to make this political," he said.

Under AB 32, California must cut its greenhouse-gas emissions back to 1990 levels by 2020. Meeting that target will demand big increases in energy efficiency, renewable electricity and alternative fuels, among other changes. The law's regulations begin to take effect in January, with emissions cuts phased in over the next decade.

The debate over whether those cuts will crush the economy or boost it has been bubbling since Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the law in 2006.

Schwarzenegger has consistently pitched a vision of a low-carbon future filled with green jobs and technological innovation.

Studies funded by environmental advocates and foundations have concluded that efficiency gains and demand for new energy technologies will deliver an economic boost. A study last year that assumed somewhat more aggressive emissions cuts than required by AB 32 predicted a roughly 3 percent boost to the state economy and 403,000 new jobs by 2020. The study was commissioned by Next 10, a Palo Alto-based nonprofit.

"Every time we're able to save money on fossil fuels, we can spend more money on in-state goods and services," which are more job-intensive, said David Roland-Holst, the study's author and an adjunct professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley.

AB 32 calls for the state Air Resources Board to produce a peer-reviewed economic analysis that would, in theory, settle the issue.

The agency's first attempt, incorporating Roland-Holst's modeling, found AB 32 would boost gross state product by about 0.3 percent and save households about $500 a year.

But outside economists weren't convinced.

After the report's release last October, reviewers tore into it for understating AB 32's costs, among other problems. Harvard University economist Robert Stavins wrote that it was "terribly deficient." The nonpartisan state Legislative Analyst's Office called the study "inconsistent and incomplete."

Last December, the Air Resources Board ordered the analysis to be redone. A major revision is due by the end of the year.

Sen. Lindsey Graham breaks ranks on emissions

By Jennifer A. Dlouhy, Hearst Newspapers
In the S.F. Chronicle, Sunday, October 18, 2009

Washington -- Proponents of capping greenhouse gas emissions blamed for global warming may have just found an unexpected ally on Capitol Hill: Republican Lindsey Graham.

The two-term senator from South Carolina drew the ire of conservative activists last week after he joined Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., in outlining the framework of a bipartisan plan for combatting climate change that would tie greenhouse gas reductions with new nuclear power nationwide and expanded offshore drilling.

Environmentalists labeled the move a "game changer" that could propel controversial climate change legislation through the Senate, past dubious Democrats worried about the impact on home-state industries such as mining and manufacturing, and Republicans who consider it a damaging "energy tax."

"It's hard to overstate the significance of this," said Dan Lashof, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It ensures that the Senate bill will be bipartisan."

This year, the House narrowly passed climate change legislation that would impose a 17 percent reduction of 2005 levels of carbon dioxide emissions by 2020. In the Senate, Kerry and Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., have introduced a similar bill with a more ambitious 20 percent target by 2020, but their measure has been stymied by the time-consuming health care debate and some Democratic opposition.

The climate change bills would set up a cap-and-trade plan so that refineries, manufacturers and other businesses could meet ever-tightening emissions limits by either cutting pollution or buying and trading allowances to spew heat-trapping gases.

In an opinion published in the New York Times on Oct. 10, Graham and Kerry backed the broad outlines for an energy bill with a cap-and-trade plan. It also would include:

- Programs to encourage the development of carbon capture and storage technology that could make coal-fired power plants cleaner.
- The opening of some coastal regions for new oil and gas drilling leases.
- Incentives to encourage the construction of new nuclear power plants.
- A new border tax on products from countries that do not impose similar emissions limits, aimed at helping U.S. manufacturers avoid a competitive disadvantage.

The Graham-Kerry alliance is a potent force for climate change bill supporters, who can push a cap-and-trade plan through the Senate only if they win over enough Republicans to make up for the handful of Democrats expected to vote against the legislation.

"There's a way to grow Republican support, but it is a give and take," Graham said. "Republicans have to give in the area of recognizing that climate change is real, and a cap-and-trade system is part of the solution."

Democrats, meanwhile, must "give on the idea that you can't be serious about climate change solutions if you include nuclear power and energy independence," Graham said.

But Graham's Republican colleagues on Capitol Hill aren't sold on his bipartisan pitch. His longtime friend and frequent ally, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said he can't back the plan unless it includes more robust support for nuclear power.

The oil and gas industry also has been cool to the Graham-Kerry proposal.

"Encouraging more U.S. oil and natural gas development is a good thing," said Karen Matusic, a spokeswoman for the American Petroleum Institute. "But the climate legislation that's been advanced so far ... falls well short of what the nation needs."

Groups Criticize a Proposal to Pull Environmental Funds

By Mireya Navarro, staff writer
N.Y. Times, Sunday, October 18, 2009

Gov. David A. Patersons' proposal to pull money from an environmental fund to help alleviate New York's financial woes is meeting with harsh criticism from environmental groups, who say that it sets a troubling precedent.

Last spring, New York state officials finalized a plan to spend the $220 million in the fund to improve energy efficiency in low-income homes, promote renewable energy technologies and institute other environmental programs.

But late last week, Governor Paterson proposed moving nearly half of the money — raised under a carbon trading program known as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative — to help close the state's nearly $50 billion deficit instead.

"Needless to say, we were pretty shocked," said Jackson Morris, air and energy program director for Environmental Advocates of New York, a group that follows environmental policy issues in Albany. "In the general fund, the money would go into a black hole and it's like it never existed."

The initiative is an effort by New York and nine other Northeastern and Middle Atlantic states to reduce the region's carbon dioxide emissions. Governor Paterson has said that he is committed to the program's goals.

Mr. Morris said that the governor's proposal would take money from a program that would save New Yorkers money on heating and energy bills at a time when pocketbooks are tight. And, he said, if New York drew from its fund, other states might decide to draw from theirs.

"There's a real danger that governors are going to take notice and follow his bad lead," Mr. Morris said. "Just putting it on the table has already done damage."

Marcia Bystryn, president of the New York League of Conservation Voters, also said she was concerned that the proposal would set a precedent by using the money "as a reserve fund for other state programs."

Under the initiative, often called RGGI (pronounced Reggie), the states cap the carbon dioxide emissions from power companies and make them buy tradable permits for the emissions they produce. The states earmark the money from the permit sales for energy-saving and renewable energy programs.

Last April, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority approved a plan to invest the money. But a lawsuit challenging the initiative, brought against the state by one of the power companies, has prevented use of the money.

On Thursday, Mr. Paterson proposed moving $90 million of the initiative's money to the general fund, to help with the deficit once the lawsuit is resolved. Morgan Hook, a spokesman for the governor's office, noted that the state's shortfall has also required cuts in health care and education. He said the proposal should not be taken as an indication that Mr. Paterson's commitment to the environment has waned.

The majority of the money in the fund — $112 million — would still be used to finance energy audits and retrofits for homes and small businesses under a recently passed green jobs bill, Mr. Hook said.

He added, "This is a necessary action so that the state can continue paying its bills for the rest of the calendar year."

Climate concerns turn city's smell into cash cow

By Dina Cappiello - Associated Press Writer
In the Modesto Bee and Merced Sun-Star, Saturday, October 17, 2009

GREELEY, Colo. -- The smell of manure hangs over Greeley as it has for half a century.

These days it's more than just a potent reminder of the region's agricultural roots and the hundreds of thousands of cattle raised on the city's outskirts.

Investors are lining up to support a planned clean energy park that eventually will convert some of the methane gas released from the manure piles into power for a cheese factory and other businesses. JBS, which runs two of the largest feed yards and the local slaughterhouse, is testing a new technology that heats the cattle excrement and turns it into energy.

"What once used to be a waste stream that was just a byproduct ... they are now recognizing has value," said Bruce Biggi, the economic development coordinator for the city of Greeley, which received an $82,000 grant from the governor's energy office this year for the park.

The idea is to lure new business to the area with what Biggi likes to call its renewable natural gas - the endless supply of methane from cheap manure.

By reducing the amount of the potent greenhouse gas released into the air, the projects also potentially could turn cow dung into dollars, if a climate bill before Congress becomes law.

"Agriculture and agribusiness is what Greeley is all about," Biggi said. "We needed to take that strong traditional economic base and ... merge it with emerging renewable energy and technology."

Waste may be the new energy crop in these parts. But elsewhere, communities are looking anew at power sources such as the sun and wind that may exist in their own backyards.

The shift is being driven partly by legislation in Congress that would reduce the gases linked to global warming.

The legislation, experts acknowledge, would do little to stem the heating up of the planet if other countries don't take similar action.

Should President Barack Obama sign the bill, it would put a price on each ton of carbon dioxide released. That would drive up the cost of polluting fossil fuels such as oil and natural gas and lead to investment in cleaner sources of energy.

Getting into the game now - like JBS and the investors eyeing Greeley's energy park are doing - could potentially reap profits: selling credits generated by reducing greenhouse gases now into the emissions-trading market the bill would create.

That market could prove lucrative for projects that reduce methane, which is 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide when it comes to trapping heat in the earth's atmosphere.

The fear in Greeley, and elsewhere, is what else the legislation would change.

In the city and surrounding Weld County, the worry is it would raise energy and fertilizer costs for farmers. They need to pump water to irrigate their crops and rely on cheap manure - the same manure that will be tapped for energy - when high natural gas prices drive up the cost of fertilizer.

For the oil and gas industry, which produces more oil in Weld County than any other in the state, a shift to cleaner sources of energy could take away good-paying jobs. And it's not clear whether all those will be replaced by the new green jobs that supporters are banking on.

"I can't think of another place in the country like Weld County, where all the various interests are at play," said John Christiansen, a spokesman for Anadarko Petroleum Corp., which produces oil and gas from 4,600 wells in the county. Many are on fields planted with feed corn, which also is being used to produce ethanol for gasoline locally.

Beijing’s Air Is Cleaner, but Far From Clean

By Michael Wines, staff writer
N.Y. Times, Thursday, October 16, 2009

BEIJING — This city’s network of arterials, five ring roads that are fed by nine more freeways, is barely two decades old, but it is already sclerotic. Roughly four million vehicles clog Beijing roads, seven times the number about 15 years ago. On any given day, another 1,500 new vehicles join the crush.

So it is no surprise that Beijing has some of the worst air pollution of any big city on earth.

No, the surprise is this: Beijing’s air is actually getting cleaner.

China may have a hard-earned reputation for long-neglected and fearsome environmental problems, from poisoned rivers to chemical-belching smelters. But the nation’s capital, Beijing, is trying hard to clean up its dirty air.

The results show up not only in recent pitch-perfect October days, but in the data that for years have presented a bleak picture of pollution here.

Through September, the government counted 221 days in which the 0-to-500 pollution index — the lower the number, the better — was below 101. It was the greatest number of “blue-sky days,” as the city calls them, since daily measurements were first published in 1998.

At the same time, the city has recorded only 2 days with dangerously high air pollution. That is the lowest number in a decade, and fully 17 days fewer than were logged in the same period in 2000.

Outside experts caution that the city’s measurements are not just imprecise — they do not measure the tiniest particulates that are most damaging to lungs, for instance — but potentially misleading. The government index is a 24-hour average of readings from monitors citywide. In contrast, a single monitor operated by the United States Embassy in downtown Beijing, where traffic is heavy, consistently reports less healthy air conditions than the official index.

And Beijing’s air remains far from pristine by any measure. The average concentration of particulates in city air during 2008, for example, was six times the ideal standard recommended by the World Health Organization. Indeed, Beijing has yet to meet the W.H.O.’s interim air standards for developing countries — or even the less stringent standards posted by China’s national government.

Yet if the air remains bad, experts say, the trend toward clearer skies is both steady and undeniable.

“For those of us who have been monitoring air pollutants for about 10 years, we see a clear reduction in pollution,” Zhu Tong, a professor and air pollution scientist at Peking University’s College of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, said in an interview.

In the past decade, in fact, authorities have moved against air pollution problems with a tenacity that some environmentalists in developed nations, pitted against industry lobbyists and balky political machinery, can only envy.

Consider: since 1999, the city has ratcheted up its new-car emissions standards from nonexistent to the level of Euro IV, the same clean-tailpipe requirements that are now enforced across the European Union nations. The rest of China will move to Euro IV next year.

With the switch to Euro IV, Beijing environmental officials last year ordered a 90 percent reduction in the sulfur content of gasoline and diesel fuel, as well as significant new cuts in polluting compounds like benzene and aromatic hydrocarbons in gasoline.

Nor is that all. More than 4,100 of the 20,000 city buses run on clean-burning compressed or liquefied natural gas — the largest such fleet in the world. The Beijing subway system, currently about 125 miles of tunnels and overhead tracks, is undergoing a breakneck expansion that will nearly triple its length in the next five years.

Nor is that all, either. Before last year’s Olympics, the government imposed a regimen based on even and odd license-plate numbers that effectively banned half of all private automobiles from the road on weekdays.

Officials — and the public — liked it so much that a modified version, banning one in five cars, is now a permanent rule.

The city also bans heavy trucks from entering the city during the day; after dark, the 18-wheelers can be seen lining up on suburban freeways, waiting for permission to enter. The oldest, dirtiest automobiles — called “yellow-label” cars, after the sticker glued to their windshields — are banned from the center city altogether.

And in July, 11 national government ministries took a leaf from the Obama administration’s Cash for Clunkers program and began offering rebates of $440 to $880 to people who trade in old high-pollution cars and trucks for new ones. Officials estimate that the program will sweep about 2.7 million dirty autos from the roads nationwide.

Impressive as all that is, it may not be enough. While Beijing’s air is cleaner now than in the recent past, the improvements have been largely, though not totally, offset by a sevenfold increase in the number of vehicles since 1993.

Many of the easy cleanup measures, like improving fuel quality and banning the dirtiest vehicles, have already been made. Future improvements will be harder to attain — and yet the flood of cars onto the streets is only growing.

The government insists that it is winning the race. Because older autos emit as much as 30 times the pollution of new ones, officials say, scrapping a relatively few clunkers makes room for many new replacements.

Moreover, improvements in gasoline and diesel fuel quality have lowered pollution from all vehicles, including the older ones.

But the city’s cleanup drive is not stopping at its highways.

In the past five years, Beijing has converted 60,000 boilers and commercial heaters to run on clean natural gas instead of coal. The city’s four coal-fired power plants — all of them major polluters — have installed state-of-the-art pollution scrubbers.

Nearly 2,900 gas stations and petroleum storage tanks have been equipped with recycling controls. Hundreds of heavily polluting factories have been moved from central Beijing, including a coking coal plant and a steel mill that is scheduled to depart by the end of 2010.

The mill is a prime example of environmental action, China-style. A unit of the Shougang Group, China’s fourth largest steelmaker, it has been one of Beijing’s biggest employers. When its 140-mile move to neighboring Hebei Province is completed next year, 65,000 Beijing workers will lose their jobs.

On the other hand, thousands more are getting a better life. Consider Wang Shuqin, a 64-year-old resident of one of Beijing’s century-old hutongs, or alleys, who recently got a new electric space heater for her two-bedroom apartment.

Like most all hutong denizens, Mrs. Wang and her husband, Liu Xingye, have weathered decades of Beijing winters by feeding round bricks of coal into a squat pot-bellied stove. Every day they emptied the stove’s ashes, turning their bedroom floor black. Every night they worried about carbon-monoxide poisoning.

Every year, they burned 1,200 one-kilogram coal bricks — one and one-third tons of coal — to stay warm. Until now: this month, Beijing’s city government gave the couple a two-thirds discount on the electric heater, and a laughably low nighttime rate for electric power, 3 cents a kilowatt-hour.

Since 2004, Beijing has replaced 94,000 pot-bellied coal stoves with efficient electric heaters, eliminating the filth that came from chimneys burning roughly 100,000 tons of coal a year.

Because of that and other changes, Beijing’s sulfur emissions have been cut almost in half compared with 2000, and industrial dust has decreased by two-thirds.

“It’s cleaner. It’s much safer,” Mrs. Wang said, flashing a thumbs up. “Now we no longer worry about getting poisoned.”

Increasingly, neither does the rest of Beijing.

Bakersfield Californian, Commentary, Sunday, Oct. 18 2009:

City sued over development! No one's shocked

By Lois Henry, Californian Columnist

Hey! The Sierra Club sued Bakersfield over The Canyons housing development!

OK, it's not exactly the "Who shot J.R.?" surprise ending to our long community nightmare over this project. (Meaning it wasn't unexpected.)

But it's important to understand the underpinnings of this suit so we know what's on the horizon. Because if we don't get our planning act together, we could lose a lot more taxpayer money in similar lawsuits.

"The primary area of contention is global warming," Gordon Nipp, local rep for the Kern-Kaweah chapter of the Sierra Club told me. "There needs to be some mitigation for climate change, and the city is doing none whatsoever."

Before some of you out there start stomping around and gritting your teeth that global warming is a load of enviro-hooey, new state laws mean business on this issue and it would behoove local officials to pay attention to those laws

I've mentioned before how AB 32 (requiring the state to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020) and SB 375 (requiring cities to plan in a more walkable, public transit-oriented manner) mean the sprawl party is over.

And how the attorney general has shown a hair trigger for suing cities whose general plans don't adhere to those laws.

All that apparently hasn't phased the city of Bakersfield (and to a lesser extent the county of Kern) when it comes to pushing through more business-as-usual developments.

It's true that the details for how to implement AB 32 and SB 375 are still being worked out. But, come on, we know the intent and ignoring it won't make it go away.

Especially with Nipp watching over the city's and county's shoulders.

Or the attorney general's office, which sent two representatives here in early summer for a little howdy-do over our general plan update (still in the works).

Afterward, one of the deputy AGs, Harrison Pollak, sent the city and county a lovely thank-you letter for the kind welcome, he told me.

By the way, he said in his letter, you are currently required under the California Environmental Quality Act to analyze the impacts of global warming and climate change.

"That was contrary to the position the city had taken in letters they had sent," he told me back then.

I'd take that as a fairly direct message if I were the city, kind of like finding a dead fish on your doorstep.

Several months later, however, The Canyons' EIR sailed through the Planning Commission and was OK'd by the City Council last month with zippo for greenhouse gas mitigation.

"The EIR said it emitted something like 24,000 tons a year of greenhouse gases," Nipp, a retired math professor, said. "Well I can run the computer model just as well as them, better probably since I'm not being paid to come up with small numbers, and it was more like 42,000 tons per year."

The county is doing a somewhat better job on this issue, he said, by requiring a 29 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions for every development. But they're still approving what amounts to sprawl, including the 1,100-house project by Bakersfield Land Investment in the extreme northwest. (Stay tuned for another Sierra Club lawsuit on that one as well.)

But back to The Canyons lawsuit.

Bakersfield Planning Director Jim Eggert told me that while the city doesn't mitigate for greenhouse gases, per se, it does so indirectly by requiring zero air quality impact.

That sounds reasonable, except we're talking about very different emissions.

Air quality mitigation looks at nitrogen oxide (NOx), reactive organic gases and particulate matter. Greenhouse gas mitigation looks mainly at carbon dioxide (C02).

So you may reduce a little C02 because you're reducing NOx. But, Nipp said, no one knows how much you're reducing because they aren't analyzing the numbers as they should in the EIR.

Nipp reminded me that the city only began requiring air quality mitigation after the Sierra Club sued several developments over the issue.

"Well, we're going to sue if there's no greenhouse gas mitigation and we'll sue if there's no farmland mitigation when that's an issue," he promised.

Yup, planning by lawsuit -- still the Kern County way.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays.

O.C. Register blog, Friday, October 16, 2009:

State OKs basing car insurance on actual mileage driven

posted by Mary Ann Milbourn

California motorists will soon have the option of having their auto insurance based on the actual miles they drive every year, state Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner announced today.

He said the Office of Administrative Law has approved new pay-as-you-drive regulations that would allow insurers to charge based on actual mileage driven rather than an estimate. Poizner proposed the change last year.

“Pay as you drive is an innovative way to give California motorists financial rewards for driving less, leading to lower-cost auto insurance, less air pollution and a reduced dependence on foreign oil,” said Poizner. “After a year of hard work by my team at the Department of Insurance and months of working with consumer groups and other valuable parties to fine tune these regulations, these regulations are now in effect and I encourage insurance companies to start offering this pay-as-you-drive option to California consumers.”

The new rules will give motorists the option of traditional insurance based on estimated mileage or the new regulations under which auto premiums are based on verified mileage driven. A discount may be offered to auto policy holders who opt to be charged based on the mileage they drive

Insurance companies can verify mileage through an odometer reading by the insurer, the insurer’s agent or a smog check station, through self-reporting or a device placed on the vehicle.

Insurers will have to get the insurance commissioner’s approval before then can implement their plans.

Last August, the Environmental Defense Fund estimated that if 30% of motorists participate in pay-as-you-drive coverage, California could avoid 55 million tons of CO_2 emissions between 2009 and 2020 — the equivalent of taking 10 million cars off the road. It also would save Californians an estimated 5.5 billion gallons of gasoline and $40 billion dollars in car-related expenses.