

Hey SF, the wind blows both ways

FresnoBee.com, Smog Blog, Friday, Jan. 2, 2009

Dennis Housepian of Fresno sent me an interesting e-mail this week about pollution from the Bay Area, and vice versa.

He was reacting to a Wednesday column item on the Bay Area's study of wintertime pollution coming into its basin from the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. They think the Central Valley might be sending pollution into their basin.

Housepian's reaction:

"The Bay Area Air Quality Management District can't have it both ways. They can't claim that the Valley pollution pollutes the Bay Area during the Winter and the Bay Area Pollution doesn't pollute the Valley air during the Summer.

"If the wind direction during winter blows the Valley pollution into the Bay area as they claim, then they must admit that the summer wind direction is blowing the Bay Area pollution into the Valley.

"With there being a far greater number of vehicles in the Bay Area, the summer wind direction is blowing far more pollution into the Central Valley than the Valley alone can control, there has to be far stricter pollution controls placed on the Bay Area to protect the citizens of the Valley."

Burning ban in effect until noon

Bay Area News Group

In the Tri-Valley Herald, Sunday, January 4, 2009

Burning banned through noon: Bay Area residents planning to build a cozy fire will have to wait until this afternoon.

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has issued a Winter Spare the Air Alert banning wood burning indoors and outdoors all day Sunday through noon today.

The agency predicted that air quality would be unhealthy and hence is banning the burning of wood in fireplaces, wood stoves and inserts, pellet stoves and outdoor fire-pits by individuals and businesses.

Winter air pollution is mainly caused by small-particle pollution or tiny particles from wood smoke. Smoke from wood-burning fires is linked to illnesses such as asthma, bronchitis and lung disease and is especially harmful for children and the elderly.

To see the current air quality forecast or to check before burning wood, visit www.sparetheair.org or call 1-877-4-NO-BURN. Residents can also sign up to get Spare the Air alerts.

San Joaquin Valley blueprint: Urban sprawl limits meet resistance

Some decision-makers fear too much density in rural areas.

By Russell Clemings, The Fresno Bee

In Merced Sun-Star, Friday, Jan. 2, 2009

A move to encourage tight limits on urban sprawl in the Valley is meeting resistance from many of the region's political leaders.

As it heads toward a decision that could shape Valley growth over the next four decades, the two-year-old San Joaquin Valley Blueprint planning process is split between one proposal that calls for an average of 18 people per acre of new development and another for 31 people per acre.

To the extent that local governments stick to the eventual plan, both versions would result in higher housing densities than the current average, which is 13 people (a little more than four homes) per acre.

But in recent weeks, some key decision-makers have come out against the higher of the two proposals, saying that it is too much density for the Valley, especially outside metro areas like Bakersfield and Fresno.

"Kern County and Fresno County are basically metropolitan counties. Tulare County is a rural county. One shoe does not fit everybody," said Tulare County Supervisor Allen Ishida.

Initial talks on the Blueprint, a state-funded effort aimed at long-term planning for the region, began in 2006. Now, discussions are about to kick into high gear.

A public "summit" meeting is scheduled Jan. 26 at the Fresno Convention Center.

After that, a regional panel of two political leaders from each county will pick a preferred future growth plan and send it to each county for a vote in April. The resulting plan will not have the force of law, but it is expected to influence other, local plans throughout the Valley.

A law signed last year by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger increases the odds that compliance with the regional plan will bring more state transportation and housing money. That new law, Senate Bill 375, requires local agencies to provide for greenhouse-gas reductions in their long-range transportation and housing plans.

Some Valley leaders think the Blueprint process gives them a head start on compliance with the new law.

"That increased density may put us in a better position for transportation funding," said Fowler City Council Member Rico Aguayo.

"I believe we are probably two years ahead of schedule when it comes to SB 375."

But where some see opportunity, others see a threat -- one that would force Valley counties to adopt a development style they say is more suited to cities like Santa Monica.

An average density of 31 people per acre would mean 10 housing units per acre. And that is something Ishida says Tulare County residents would not accept.

"What you'd basically have are condominium projects," Ishida said. "That's not our market."

Similar concerns were raised at a recent meeting of the Council of Fresno County Governments policy board, made up of mayors and other elected officials from each of the county's 15 cities and the county Board of Supervisors.

After long discussion, the board voted unanimously to endorse the lower-density version of the alternatives.

For Fresno County, that means eight homes or 25 people per acre, compared to 10.1 homes or 32 people under the high-density plan and 3.8 units or 12 people under present conditions.

"It's market forces and Mother Nature that are going to dictate how towns grow and how fast," said Selma Mayor Dennis Lujan.

Supporters of the more aggressive proposal -- including an advisory panel of public officials, business leaders and activists who voted for it Nov. 7 -- point to its environmental benefits: Less

driving, lower energy consumption, fewer greenhouse gas emissions and less farmland that would be consumed by new development.

By 2050, the Valley would convert 533,000 acres to urban development under current trends. Increasing new development to 18 people per acre would save 135,000 acres. Making it 31 people per acre would save almost twice as much, 262,000 acres.

In addition, the 18-people-per-acre version would cut energy use by 8 percent and miles driven by 10 percent. The 35-people-per-acre version would cut energy use by 25 percent and miles driven by 27 percent.

Greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to global warming, would drop by similar increments, according to computer projections. Still, none of the region's eight counties supports the more aggressive version.

The highest densities any now propose are by Merced County, with 28 people per acre, and Fresno County, 25 per acre. Tulare County's proposal calls for 17 people per acre, Kings County is at 24, and Madera is at 15.

At the other extreme is Stanislaus County, where local leaders endorsed an alternative that basically consists of existing land-use plans.

Vince Harris, executive director of the Stanislaus Council of Governments, called it "an approach that we think is viable."

Given the resistance to the highest housing densities, it may be uncertain how much change will actually result from the Blueprint process. Nevertheless, Aguayo told the policy board that the exercise has value, if only to show what is possible.

"The intent is: 'Look, this is a vision. If we choose to grow this way we can reduce greenhouse gases, we can improve air quality, we can improve our transportation systems,' " he said.

Bay Area Spare the Air alert issued

By Janis Mara

Contra Costa Times, Sunday, Jan. 4, 2009

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Nev. advocate tries to block new power plant

The Associated Press

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, Jan. 5, 2009

CARSON CITY, Nev. -- The state Consumer Protection Bureau has filed a lawsuit to try to block construction of a new gas-fired power plant 25 miles outside of Las Vegas.

The suit filed Tuesday in District Court in Carson City argues that NV Energy customers will pay too much for electricity if the plant is built.

The bureau, a division of the attorney general's office, wants the Public Utilities Commission to reconsider its decision to allow the 500-megawatt Harry Allen plant. It argues the utility should instead have purchased a gas-fired power plant at Apex. Broadway Gen Funding LLC, a subsidiary of LS Power, offered to sell Apex for \$545 million.

Customers would save more than \$200 million if NV Energy were to buy the Apex plant rather than building Harry Allen, which is estimated to cost \$780 million, the bureau argued.

The utilities commission "refused to balance the interest of the customers with those of the shareholders," Senior Deputy Attorney General William Stanley wrote in the suit.

Chelsie Campbell, spokeswoman for NV Energy, said the utility had no comment on the lawsuit because litigation is pending. Sean Sever, spokesman for the Public Utilities Commission, said the commission was just served with the lawsuit Wednesday and was reviewing the case.

The lawsuit also says NV Energy, formerly called Nevada Power, spent money developing Harry Allen even before it got approval from the state.

In late November, the commission denied a request from the bureau to reconsider its decision on Harry Allen.

NV Energy has asked the commission to approve a rate increase that pays for \$285 million of the Harry Allen plant. The power company seeks an 18 percent increase in residential utility rates.

But that rate increase doesn't cover the remaining \$495 million cost of Harry Allen. For that, the company plans to ask for an additional rate increase.

The possibility of buying the Apex facility surfaced during commission hearings on Harry Allen, but NV Energy executives said it wasn't really an offer, only a request for further negotiations.

"The company's position was that there was never really an offer on the table," said Tim Hay, former consumer advocate and member of the commission. "But to me it seems like the magnitude of the dollar amount is enough that I am proud of the consumer advocate's office for trying to do this."

NV Energy has said it had an incentive to go ahead with the Harry Allen plant because the permit for the plant was set to expire if construction did not begin. Michael Yackira, NV Energy president, has said the Harry Allen plant is likely the last that could be permitted in the Las Vegas Valley because of poor air quality here.

Harry Allen is expected to be operating by summer 2011.

Water, economy key issues for 2009

Ag could see more difficulties under greenhouse gas reduction plan

By Tim Hearden

Capital Press Ag Weekly, Wednesday, December 31, 2008

Water supplies, prices and regulations are among the key factors that will determine how successful California agriculture is in 2009.

Farmers and ranchers have been watching with some hope that the past couple of weeks of rain and snow in the Golden State could herald the end of drought conditions that have drained reservoirs for the past two years.

The rainfall could play a role in how much water is delivered to irrigators south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, who could lose up to half their water under a recent decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Meanwhile, the struggling worldwide economy will affect commodity prices, which took a roller-coaster ride in 2008.

"With exports so important to this state, especially in certain sectors ... we're going to be following that very closely," said Jack King, manager of national affairs for the California Farm Bureau Federation. "That will have a major bearing on the prospects for the next year."

As they grapple with weather and the economy, farmers and ranchers face an array of looming regulations, ranging from new air-quality rules for diesel engines to proposed legislation to label the carbon footprint of consumer products.

Perhaps the most significant issue facing growers in 2009 is water. Rainfall in the Sacramento area was at less than 70 percent of normal for the season before last week's Christmas storm.

California as a whole has recorded a little more than half its normal runoff into rivers and reservoirs the past two years.

"Our water storage has been depleted both above ground and underground," said Dave Kranz, the California Farm Bureau Federation's manager of media services. "The reservoir storage figures are pretty bleak. Anybody who's driven by the San Luis Reservoir has seen how scary it looks. It's down to about a third of average and a fifth of its capacity. There's very little water in the San Luis."

Water storage levels will factor into the Fish and Wildlife Service's determination of how much water can be pumped out of the delta. The new federal rules are an effort to protect threatened delta smelt, one of the estuary's small inhabitants.

Two environmental groups have sued to shut down the pumps in the delta entirely, while a trio of water districts filed their own lawsuits to overturn restrictions on delta water delivery operations.

These battles are among a number of different fights that are expected to take place over water in the coming year. Farmers and their advocates have accused the state of imposing new restrictions on water rights to protect fish, and a biological opinion on fish due out in March could determine the fate of the Red Bluff Diversion Dam, which diverts water for 150,000 acres of farmland in the Sacramento Valley.

Aside from water, economics will also play a significant role in 2009. Both commodities and input costs rose and fell with the price of fuel in the past year, and the worldwide recession will have major implications for California's exports.

Unstable prices for grains and other commodities since 2005 have destabilized markets as a whole, causing some governments to adopt "food self-sufficient" policies, World Bank food crisis expert Christopher Delgado said at the state Farm Bureau's annual meeting last month.

"What we're tracking carefully is what impact the strengthening of the dollar or the weakening of the dollar has on world sales versus what impact a slowing economy has ... on other countries' ability to buy our products," King said.

Meanwhile, farmers and ranchers must prepare for several sweeping new regulations in the coming year. Under pollution rules adopted last month by the California Air Resources Board, heavy-duty diesel trucks will face emissions-reducing requirements beginning in 2010.

Older trucks will have to be fitted with smog traps, and fleet modernization efforts will have to take place between 2012 and 2023.

Growers already must spend thousands of dollars replacing or upgrading the stationary diesel engines they use to irrigate their fields under state air pollution control measures that take effect in 2012 for some engines and 2016 for others.

The engines had to be registered with counties in 2008.

Agriculture could face further restrictions under the Air Resources Board's ambitious greenhouse gas reduction plan, which follows state legislation to cut emissions to 1990 levels by 2020.

Also on the horizon is legislation in the state Assembly that would require the air board to set up a voluntary program to label the carbon footprint of products sold in California, according to a recent Almond Board of California report. The bill by Assemblyman Ira Ruskin, D-Los Altos, was first introduced in March and will be taken up when the Legislature reconvenes this month.

Solution for emission problem in the pipeline

Dairy owner sells renewable natural gas to utility

By Cecilia Parsons

Capital Press Ag Weekly, Wednesday, December 31, 2008

Tough air quality rules that make it difficult to secure operating permits for dairies provided David Albers the spark for a solution.

Dairies produce gas, he reasoned, and utility companies need renewable gas sources for energy. Building a system to deliver the gas while giving dairies credit for reducing emissions seemed like a good fit.

Using methane gas produced in a dairy digester to provide energy isn't a new concept, but Albers, a Bakersfield, Calif.-based environmental attorney and dairy owner, provided a new twist. He would design and build projects that take biogas from several dairies, convert it to a form useable by a utility and feed it into their gas pipeline.

Dairy owners receive part of the proceeds from the sale of gas. Sale of the resulting emissions credits, since the project removes greenhouse gases from the environment, also generates income for owners.

Albers' first project, at his Vintage Dairy in Fresno County, began providing gas to Pacific Gas & Electric Company in October. It is the first in California to deliver pipeline-quality, renewable natural gas to a utility.

His second project, in Kern County, is scheduled to go online by November 2009. With four dairies under contract for that project, he could deliver 500,000 cubic feet of gas per day. Albers' company, BioEnergy Solutions, has a long-term contract with PG&E to deliver up to 3 billion cubic feet of natural gas a year. The utility uses the gas to deliver electricity to customers in central and northern California.

"David is the only one in California to do this successfully," said Ken Brennan of PG&E. "His company is the front runner in the state."

Brennan said that PG&E is impressed with the quality of the gas that comes from the dairy

pipeline.

"The gas molecules are the same as every other natural gas molecule," Brennan said.

Albers wanted to bypass the electricity production from methane that so many dairies have tried because the generators used to convert gas to electricity have run into problems with the air districts due to their production of nitrous oxides.

Albers saw the gas pipeline route as a better choice.

In his law practice, Albers assists dairy producers with the permit process, which includes responding to public comments about the proposed dairies.

"As part of the process we do an environmental analysis of the project, and in public comments someone would always ask 'why don't you build a digester?'

In response, Albers would do an economic analysis for a digester and find it wasn't economically feasible.

"There was no market to justify the cost," he said.

Then came a mandate for utilities to use renewable sources for energy.

"I started to talk with PG&E and eight months later I had a contract," he said.

Albers said he just had to figure out how to build the infrastructure to gather the gas from dairies, convert it to a useable form and send it to the utility.

"It was really just a new application of existing technology. We were putting different Tinkertoys together," he said.

The Vermeer and Goedhart Dairy west of Shafter is the lead dairy in Albers' Kern County project. Ben Goedhart milks 2,800 cows plus has another 3,200 head of heifers and dry cows. Originally from Chino, Goedhart has been milking cows in Shafter for the past six years.

Albers has contracts with three other nearby dairies to build systems to collect and pipe their methane to the collection site. Most dairies would use the covered lagoons as digesters, he said, but on some, tank digesters would be more efficient.

"We build what works best for that dairy," Albers said.

When it's time to renew his operating permit, Goedhart expects the process to be easier if he is reducing his methane emissions with a covered lagoon. He's already separating solids from the manure that is flushed from his free-stall barns. When his lined and covered lagoon digester is completed it will cover several acres. Goedhart said that in addition to the methane collection, the system would provide cleaner irrigation water for his hay and silage crops.

When his new system is in place, the manure and liquid will still go to the separator, but the methane from the liquid will be captured under the heavy cover of the lagoon and piped to a collection site.

There, the process of "scrubbing" the gas takes place. Albers said there are two steps to the process once gas is collected. The first removes hydrogen sulfide, the stinky part of the gas. The captured sulfur can be used as a fertilizer. The second separates methane molecules from carbon dioxide molecules. The carbon dioxide is flared off and the methane is pressurized and goes into the pipeline for PG&E.

Year in Review: Hanford government -- a year of controversy and change

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, Jan. 1, 2008

The corn ethanol controversy hit home in Hanford in 2008. A distilling plant proposed by Great Valley Ethanol -- a \$115 million project pushed by the boom -- was proposed in south Hanford. Despite concerns over its impact on air quality and water supply, it was approved, prompting a lawsuit. In February, prosecutors criminally charged a former director of the city-funded visitor agency for embezzlement. The prosecution came a year after a major financial shortfall and budget irregularities within the tax-funded organization came to light.

It was another year marked with a string of controversies that culminated in the closure of two separate criminal cases against two successive former city managers.

It was also a year of change. Marcie Buford -- the longest-serving city councilwoman -- retired after 20 years in office, while Sue Sorensen won a competitive race to replace Buford.

On a positive note, 2008 also changed a lot for Hanford residents in terms of economic, educational and recreational opportunities. The Hanford Joint Educational Center made significant progress, while the much-anticipated renovation of the old Sears building downtown got under way.

Here's a look at Hanford's top stories of the year: (Note: stories not related to air quality deleted)

Ethanol debate

Is grain ethanol really green? That question took center stage in the ethanol debate that began brewing in Hanford this spring.

As Bakersfield-based Great Valley Ethanol proposed to build a corn-ethanol distilling plant in south Hanford, neighbors and environmental advocates cried foul over the economic and environmental viability of the technology, and challenged city approval of the project.

After months of testimony and debate, Hanford decision-makers approved the permit application by the company for a \$115 million plant in the low-tax south Hanford industrial park. The action denied an appeal by opponents who challenged the legality of the earlier decision by the Planning Commission.

The controversy didn't end there.

The following month, a citizens group advocating for better air went to court to try to stop the project.

The lawsuit came despite numerous mitigation measures adopted by the company to address concerns. For example, the company would pay a Kings County water agency for any water usage exceeding the historical use of water for the property. The company also signed a deal with the Attorney General's Office to pay \$1 million over the first three years to the air board's pollution mitigation fund.

A settlement was reached this fall between the environmental groups and the city.

New driving laws make us safer

From the Los Angeles Daily News

In the Hanford Sentinel, Sunday, Jan. 4, 2009

Not everything that came out of Sacramento this year was bad news. There were a few -- very few -- actions that will make life for Californians better in the form of new laws.

Particularly noticeable starting Jan. 1 are new laws regarding driving that should make motorists safer on the roads. First and foremost, it will be illegal to write, send or read text messages on your cell phone or other texting device.

You already can't talk on your cell phone unless you have a headset. The fine for both infractions can be heavy. For those moaning about the new restriction, take heart. It's likely that some tech innovators will come up with voice-to-text software by midyear, if they haven't already.

Sen. Alan Lowenthal sponsored a bill that makes it a crime "to forge, counterfeit, or falsify a clean air sticker" in order to use car-pool lanes. How this law will be enforced is a mystery, since anyone with a color printer could mass-produce them, and the California Highway Patrol probably wouldn't be able to spot one.

Convicted drunk drivers who are on probation won't get much slack if they're caught driving with even a 0.01 percent blood-alcohol level (for others, the legal limit is 0.08). They'll lose their license for a year, and their vehicle will be impounded.

Motorcycles, defined this year as weighing under 1,500 pounds, will have those limits removed, and enclosed three-wheel motor vehicles will be able to use the car-pool lane. Unfortunately, no one proposed a law to banish motorcyclists who creep up behind cars, pass between lanes and scare the daylight out of drivers with their loud mufflers.

Another new law gives a smog test grace period only to drivers whose cars fail the test. They can pay \$50 for a 60-day temporary operating permit. In the past, owners could get the permit even if they didn't have their vehicles tested.

Vehicles that can't pass a smog test emit up to two tons of pollutants every day, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Families who lost a member of the armed forces can apply for a "Gold Star Family" personal license plate.

In short, if you plan to drive next year, forget about texting, don't use a counterfeit sticker to use the car-pool lane, don't try to open a used car lot without a license, don't even take a sip of alcohol if you're on probation for taking much more than a sip, get your vehicle smog-tested when you're supposed to and watch out for three-wheel vehicles in the car-pool lane.

Owner of Visalia's only electric-car lot hopes to relocate

By Valerie Gibbons

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Thursday, Jan. 1, 2009

The buzz around Visalia's only electric-car dealership is growing fainter.

The ZAP dealership at Center Avenue and Ben Maddox Way has closed up shop, leaving a handful of ZAP vehicles in the back parking lot. Owner Mike Brackett is searching for another, cheaper location, he said.

"Sales have been much slower since the price of gas went down," Brackett said. "We were selling them left and right when the price of gas was so high."

Now that the lease is up on his Visalia lot, Brackett said he hopes to lease warehouse space.

The dealership has been in Visalia for little more than a year. Brackett has sold used cars from the lot for more than a decade.

ZAP features

The Santa Rosa-based firm ZAP — an acronym for Zero Air Pollution — has been in operation for 14 years. The all-electric vehicles sell for about \$11,000 and have seating for four, leather interior and CD players.

Classified as motorcycles, the 3-wheeled vehicles reach speeds of up to 40 mph and can travel up to 25 miles between charges. A standard electrical outlet is used to recharge the vehicles.

"They appeal to elderly customers on a fixed income," Brackett said. "They're cheap to run and barely need maintenance."

Sales peaked last summer

According to the company's Security and Exchange filings, ZAP sales reached their zenith when gas prices topped \$4.50 a gallon this summer. The company reported a 50 percent jump in sales in August.

That's also when the company took out a \$10 million loan from a Dubai-based investment firm, according to SEC reports. By September, ZAP was doubling its sales but still operating at a \$2.5 million loss. The company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2002.

Dealerships — which can cost up to \$150,000 in some areas — carry the following vehicles:

- The Xebra, the company's stock three-wheeler
- The ZAP truck
- Electric scooters.

Deposits on 2009 model

ZAP is taking deposits on its Alias model, which the company claims has a range of more than 100 miles and a top speed of 105 mph. The company unveiled a prototype of the car's body design in June.

ZAP's promotional material said the Alias is due to hit the streets in June 2009.

The company has more than two dozen competitors in the global electric-car market, some of which are offering trucks and high-end sports models with a range of more than 100 miles per charge.

Conn. to launch artificial turf safety review

The Associated Press

Contra Costa Times, Sunday, Jan. 4, 2009

STAMFORD, Conn.—Connecticut's Department of Environmental Protection will launch a broad study on the safety of artificial turf playing fields, officials said Friday.

Debate has been ongoing in Connecticut and nationwide over whether recycled crumb rubber used to cushion the fields endangers children and the environment.

The DEP study will examine the makeup of the crumb rubber, and check the quality of air samples and stormwater runoff near the fields for potential contaminants.

Supporters say the artificial turf fields offer cushioning to protect children from impact injuries, and do not require the pesticides and other upkeep of traditional grass fields.

Opponents say industrial chemicals from the rubber can be released into the air and water runoff, and that children and others could inhale the chemicals.

Connecticut DEP Commissioner Gina McCarthy said the study is being conducted to respond "in a credible manner" to health and environmental concerns.

The work will be conducted in conjunction with the Connecticut Department of Public Health, Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station and University of Connecticut Health Center.

The Department of Public Health expects to evaluate the results and produce a health risk assessment in January 2010.

Karen Murphy, who has led the effort to oppose installation of two artificial turf fields in Stamford, said she is heartened the state will undertake the study. The city should not rush to finish existing turf projects before the results are available, she said.

"These artificial turfs have not been proven safe environmentally and healthwise," Murphy said. "It's very important that these studies be done now and not that seven, eight years from now we find out the impact."

Murphy is not alone in her opposition to turf fields. In August, state Rep. Kimberly Fawcett, a Democrat whose district includes Fairfield and Westport, said she supports a moratorium on new fields until the state DEP concludes an analysis.

Stamford Mayor Dan Malloy said the city has reviewed many studies on the subject and found the merits of the fields "far outweigh" any negative effects.

He also said he opposes recommendations by some opponents to consider removing existing artificial turf fields.

"I doubt very much that we're going to outlaw artificial turf," Malloy said. "If they made those recommendations, it would be opposite of all of the studies that have taken place."

This summer, Stamford officials briefly shut down the 11-year-old field at Stamford High School when testing found lead levels to be high. The field has since been reopened to all but young children.

The city's newest fields will not contain the same type of synthetic fibers that have been found to contain lead, according to the contractor on the projects.

Many Stamford parents, frustrated in the past by a lack of soccer facilities, have pressed for the construction of new turf fields. When the issue went before the city's Zoning Board in September, more than 30 parents and their children showed up to support the plan.

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Friday, Jan. 2, 2009:](#)

Frazier Park gets a break

We all must chip in if we hope to clean up the southern San Joaquin Valley's bad air. But "chipping in" must be apportioned fairly.

That's why it makes sense for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to give Frazier Park area fireplace users a break.

Frazier Park residents insisted the no-burn restrictions imposed on the district's valley should not apply in the mountains, where the bad air is less likely to be trapped by the geography. Southern valley residents can expect 43 no-burn days by the time the restriction period ends in February, but conditions in the mountains are quite different.

District officials, meeting recently with Frazier Park residents, agreed, proposing a no-burn rule specifically for the mountain community. They now must create tools for localized forecasting to implement the new rule.

In the meantime, valley residents must heed the stricter no-burn rule. It may be inconvenient, but it is working to clean the air.

[Bakersfield Californian commentary, Monday, Jan. 5, 2009:](#)

Community Voices: How are you getting to work?

When a new San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District regulation comes online in 2010, Kern County businesses and agencies with at least 100 employees will be required to establish alternative commute programs for their workers.

In addition, as Californians have grown more environmentally conscious and given wildly fluctuating fuel prices less dependent on the automobile, they have begun searching for different ways to get to work or school and run errands without compromising their schedules and quality of life.

Kern Council of Governments' Kern Commuter Connection Program is responding to these new demands with Et Cetera, a new group of employee transportation coordinators who devise alternatives to the single-occupant vehicle commute.

Made up primarily of human resources managers and professionals, Et Cetera is designed to generate ideas among companies and organizations about new commuting perspectives. The name refers to employee transportation coordination (ETC) as one of the extra tasks assigned to HR managers.

Et Cetera meets from 1:30 to 3 p.m. the second Thursday of each month at KernCOG's Bakersfield office, 1401 19th St., Suite 300. An eastern Kern County version covering Boron, California City, Tehachapi and Ridgecrest will begin meeting in early 2009.

Alternative commute strategies include walking, bicycling, public transportation, working from home, flexible scheduling and establishing park-and-ride lots to assist those who are carpooling or vanpooling. Et Cetera meetings offer speakers on a variety of topics related to these strategies.

KernCOG posts agendas and presentations on the CommuteKern.org Webpage, check the Et Cetera link.

Under federal tax codes, employers may offer commuting fringe benefits that save the company and the employee money by reducing tax obligations. These benefits apply to qualified vanpool, transit, bicycling and parking cash-out programs.

For example, if an employer decides to give an employee a \$30 monthly transit pass with the tax-free commuter benefit, the employee receives more value and it costs the employer less than providing taxable salary. Under this scenario, the employee receives a \$30 benefit, while only costing the employer \$20 after the commuter tax deduction.

Meanwhile, the employee gets a \$30 monthly benefit, amounting to a salary increase, without having to pay additional income tax.

Kern County's low population density often discourages employees, students and commuters from considering health-conscious and environmentally friendly transportation methods. Alternative commuting practices address a variety of social and economic problems related to roads, air quality, energy security and health issues all of which are local and national traffic concerns.

Whether a company wants to "go green," an agency faces operating in a new regulatory environment, or a business offers a support service, Et Cetera provides a place for networking and information-sharing among human resources professionals.

Linda Urata of Bakersfield works for the Kern Council of Governments. She is the Rideshare coordinator.

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Thursday, Dec. 1, 2009:](#)

Headlines we'd like to see in 2009

'Rush Hour 4'

Mettler inks deal to co-star in sequel of kung-fu buddy movie

Jackie Chan to pair up with 'Tusslin' Trustee'

CSUB Towers proposal back on track after bike-path beaver submits letter of finance

Iraq withdrawal complete

Idle Army may switch to domestic highway reconstruction projects

Recession evaporates

Congress: Whoa! We're not making that mistake again

GM dividends quadruple

10 millionth Aqua GT, first car to run on water, rolls off Detroit assembly line

Chrysler Sebring wins Daytona

Mears: Jumping ship to team managed by formerly moribund builder was best decision ever

Ford line completely sells out

CEO: Better get in line now for sexy 2010 models

Major networks discover secret of comedy

Execs: 'You mean we don't need to rely on bodily function jokes? Who knew?'

[Burn, baby, burn](#)

[Valley air quality reaches perfection; fireplaces decriminalized](#)

Airlines reinstate full meals

Second bag of pretzels having failed to bring back travelers, industry prepares to pull out all the stops

Miss Manners named CEO of Amtrak

'Changes coming in customer service,' queen of civility promises

Homeless Center alumnus donates \$100 million to shelter

Jacuzzis, flat-screens, UC extension coming soon

South Mill Creek park to finally open

Five living presidents to attend Bakersfield grand opening; hotels full for 300 miles around

A week without a gang shooting

Mayor announces ceremony commemorating occasion

Mervyns to reopen

'Just kidding,' retailer announces

McCarthy donates haircut to Smithsonian

Institution will display Bakersfield congressman's coif next to those of Kemp, JFK

Fuller emerges from amnesia

Assemblywoman remembers she once cared about education

Termed-out Parra expresses shock at dearth of job offers

Everybody else saw it coming

Internet turns out to be fad; newspaper subscriptions explode
Gap Inc. moves corporate headquarters to Taft
Clothier cites thriving nightlife; oil town expands border to San Bernardino County line
Housing prices skyrocket
Citing outrageous demand, builders hiring anyone who can lift a hammer

[Modesto Bee editorial, Thursday, January 1, 2009:](#)

What lessons did we learn from 2008?

Each day, water becomes more valuable. Farmers in the south San Joaquin Valley are planting less because there's not enough water for all their fields; south state cities are forcing conservation on residents; the governor has set up a "drought bank" so water can be sold. Yet, without more water none of these strategies will be enough. The only way to get more water is to capture it when it's plentiful and hold on to it for when it's not. That means having more water storage, above and below ground. But arguments over how money will be released have killed every plan for a water bond. The lesson: See previous lesson. We are getting the appropriate warnings from credible sources. But nothing substantial has happened.

- Agriculture is the heart of the valley, but that doesn't mean it is understood or appreciated. We're disappointed that thousands of Stanislaus voters joined other Californians in supporting Proposition 2, which will hurt the egg production industry. The lesson: Don't forget your roots and don't bite the hand that feeds you -- literally and financially.

- No matter how bad things get, they can always get worse. OK, we know this and there's a good chance that we'll see more store closures and job losses this year. But there's another variation: No matter how bad things get, there's always some good going on. And in our region, we can and should celebrate that:

- While most of the rest of the economy is faltering, agriculture remains pretty strong;

- Growing numbers of valley students are going on to college, including California State University, Stanislaus, and the University of California at Merced;

- A Bee special report ("Framing Our Future," published in October and still available at www.modbee.com/smartgrowth) shows that four Stanislaus cities -- Oakdale, Patterson, Turlock and Modesto -- rank in the top 10 in the valley for adopting smart-growth principles;

- While air pollution remains a serious problem, Modesto and Merced both dropped significantly on the American Lung Association's worst-air list. That means it's a little easier to breathe -- and to see the foothills lining our wide valley.

[Merced Sun-Star editorial, Friday, Jan. 2, 2009:](#)

Our View: Hope exists in new year

In the Valley, we must rely upon ourselves to make things better.

The arrival of the new year is supposed to be a time for vision, hope and optimism, when we gauge the failures and shortcomings of the recent past and lay plans for a better future.

It's hard to be sanguine at the outset of 2009, with a global recession dampening dreams and threatening lives all around us.

Things are especially grim in this region.

Even in good times the Valley lags behind the rest of the state and nation. Now, in this deepening downturn, things are even worse.

As individuals, Valley residents have little control over most of the great events of our time -- war, terrorism, recession. The economic stimulus program being prepared by the incoming Obama administration is a case in point.

Powerful interests are already jockeying fiercely for pieces of what is expected to be a considerable pie. The larger interests of the public are often at risk when the special interests collide.

But we are not without clout in that fight. Local elected leaders -- the Valley's mayors, county supervisors, school and special district officials -- should be pounding on the doors of the region's congressional representatives, demanding attention to the Valley's needs. Private citizens need to add their voices.

At the state level, we are all hostage to the dysfunctional system we call -- with increasing sarcasm -- "California government."

The inability of state leaders to do their jobs means, among other things, that they will soon be raiding local government agencies for money to patch over the failures hatched in Sacramento.

Locally, the focus must be on economic development.

The mantra for 2009 must be "jobs, jobs, jobs." But we must take a broader view of what it takes to spur economic development than has always been the case in the past.

Jobs begin in schools, whether it's a career in medicine or in maintenance. Good schools don't only produce college-bound students, they also graduate capable employees for businesses to hire right out of school, as well as talented entrepreneurs prepared to strike out on their own.

Many local school districts have made good strides in restoring what we used to call "vocational education," but with a 21st century focus. More must be done, and the private sector must be willing to help.

Economic development also means creating more livable communities. Cleaner air, better parks, safe roads, recreational and cultural opportunities, support for the arts -- all of these are part of putting more people to work in better-paying jobs.

Health care is a huge part of economic development. Families whose children are sick can quickly become a drain on public resources. Unhealthy workers are a drain on productivity.

Governments, like individuals and families, should always spend prudently. That's especially so in a period of economic downturn. But it's essential to separate investments made in people and infrastructure, which pay dividends into the future, from mere "spending."

Money invested in education and in creating a skilled work force is returned many times over. Well-paid workers pay more taxes. Healthy children do better in school, and are more likely to grow up to be productive citizens. Less poverty means less crime.

Money invested in maintaining public infrastructure, such as streets and parks, and cleaning up blight raises property values, generating more revenue for local governments. A better quality of life in all our neighborhoods will attract more outside investment and help existing businesses flourish and grow.

All that money is hard to find, even in good economic times. But it's essential that it be found. Elected leaders must be innovative, and reach out to the private sector. Businesses, churches, civic organizations -- all have roles to play.

We don't all have to agree on everything -- which is good, because we never will.

But all of us in the cities and counties of the Valley have a stake in making things better, and all of us have a duty to help.

Leaders can push that process along, but in the end the health and prosperity of the Valley and its citizens rest with its people.

Things won't get better because of some magical economic cycles or shifts in the political tides. Things will get better because we make them better -- all of us together.

Cut Your Utility Bill

By James Dulley

Contra Costa Times, Sunday, Jan. 4, 2008

Q: I have a regular fireplace I like to use, but I hate the hassle of using firewood. I was thinking of using the composite firelogs instead. Are they a good alternative for a nice fire and do they pollute a lot?

A: Using real firewood in a fireplace can get messy, and storing and handling the logs can be a lot of work. Often the pieces of firewood called "split and seasoned" are really too large to get started and difficult to split unless you are unusually strong and can swing an ax and 8-pound maul over your head.

Using artificial firelogs is a reasonable alternative to burning real firewood. Firelogs have a unique contour on top of the log to produce realistic-looking flames. The only drawback to using them often and for long periods is that the cost will be greater than using real firewood. For the occasional or short two- to three-log fire, the cost difference is not significant.

Cleaner burn

Burning real firewood can contribute to air pollution, and in some communities, it is controlled. Firelogs burn much cleaner than real firewood. They typically produce 70 percent less particulate matter, 85 percent less carbon monoxide and 50 percent less smoke.

Until recently, firelogs were made from sawdust and petroleum waxes.

Some of the heat content comes from the burning sawdust, but most comes from the waxes. The sawdust functions somewhat similar to the wick of a candle.

These firelogs produce a significant amount of heat per pound and are a good use for waste sawdust from wood mills and other woodworking companies.

Today, with more concern for the environment and higher costs of petroleum products, many firelogs are made with natural vegetable waxes instead of petroleum waxes. Because the vegetable waxes are a form of biomass, burning these natural firelogs is almost greenhouse gas-neutral.

Java-Log "... really

Another new type of environmentally friendly firelog, Java-Log, is made from recycled coffee grounds. If you accidentally tear open the bag around the log, the coffee odor is very apparent. Coffee grounds have a high heat content, so these logs produce 25 percent more heat than standard sawdust firelogs. Also, the flames are more brilliant from the coffee.

All-wood, compressed sawdust firelogs and bricks are available in some areas. These can be burned identically to real firewood because they are 100 percent wood. Waste sawdust is compressed, causing the particles to bond together into a hard block.

Firelogs also produce much less creosote than real firewood. Have your chimney checked and cleaned if necessary. Special firelogs are available to help reduce creosote in the chimney. Saver Systems (www.saversystems.com) offers an anti-creosote spray liquid for logs.

[Letter to the Fresno Bee, Friday, Jan. 2, 2009:](#)

'Yet to be proved'

Mark Grossi's piece Dec. 29 states, without equivocation, that the new no-burn rules are preventing 50 premature deaths in Fresno each year, according to a recent study by David Lighthall. How can Dr. Lighthall come to that conclusion when he cannot compare mortality in previous years with mortality this year because the new 2.5 PM rule has not yet been in force for one year, let alone three years, which his conclusion was based on?

I'd also like to know what constitutes "premature death" in Dr. Lighthall's opinion. Are all these "premature deaths" attributed to 2.5 PM, or is it possible some could be caused by smoking, dope addiction, driving while drunk, etc.

Even The Bee notes that the greatest number of "premature deaths" occur from the combination of vehicle exhaust and dairy ammonia. So why the vendetta against people who burn wood in their fireplaces, not for ambience, but for warmth?

If a man works as the health and science adviser to the Valley Air Pollution District, one might think that he would conclude what his employers wanted him to conclude -- namely that fireplace usage is a real problem, which has yet to be proved.

Leonard E. Goldberg, Fresno

[Letter to the Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Friday, Jan. 2, 2009:](#)

County plan needs more growth controls

The Tulare County General Plan Update is being compiled and when finalized it will guide how development occurs over the next two decades. In its current form, it would allow the type of sprawling, leapfrog development that has been very harmful to many San Joaquin Valley and foothill communities. Think stressed water supplies, lost farmland, overloaded roads, and polluted air.

These poor development practices don't have to continue. For a better future, the Board of Supervisors must endorse and adopt a general plan featuring smart, healthy growth policies that will protect our air, water, farmland, and quality of life. Such a positive general plan will revitalize our towns and economy with healthy new life. To accomplish all of these objectives, the General Plan must clearly direct future growth to existing, established areas that desire more people and can provide for their needs. Efficient, green builders should be encouraged with benefits that would promote more of the same. Leapfrog development and brand new towns must be prohibited.

The group Tulare County Citizens for Responsible Growth gave the county detailed suggestions in April for a community-centered Healthy Growth policy alternative for the general plan update. If you want to live in a better environment, contact the Board of Supervisors and urge them to include this Healthy Growth alternative in the revised Draft Environmental Impact Review.

Brian Newton, Visalia

[Letter to the Lodi News Sentinel, January 5, 2009:](#)

On global warming and same-sex marriage

In regards to Ron Portal's letter on Dec. 27, 2008, I believe Mr. Portal has been drinking the right-wing Kool-Aid.

Human beings are responsible for changing the climate of the earth. A lot of CO₂ is put into the atmosphere by our automobiles and industry. A large majority of our leading climate scientists believe the earth's climate is warming. A basic theorem of physics says for every action there is a reaction. Manmade CO₂ generation is an action and the reaction is climate change.

Yes, there are natural climate cycles, but recent studies show an alarming warming trend. Al Gore is not in "la la land," but just wants people to start thinking of the consequences if something is not done to decrease CO₂ emissions. It is better to error on the side of caution than to do nothing and have a global catastrophe on our hands. Global warming is not a new religion, but a real possibility.

I am an environmentalist and not an eco-terrorist, and I will bet Mr. Portal a cup of coffee that Greenland will not have an ice sheet in 10 years. I am a zoologist and I do understand how to analyze the data of climate scientists. What are Mr. Portal's credentials? Listening to Rush Limbaugh and believing his right-wing propaganda.

Now, in regards to Kether Dooley's letter of Dec. 6, 2008, I am not a Constitutional law expert; my only expertise is biology. I do not agree that our laws are inherently intertwined with religious philosophy. Why does marriage have to be defined by religious philosophy? You and your partner can go to a justice of the peace and be legally married. Marriage does not have to be a covenant between any God, a man and a woman. If same-sex couples want to get married in a church, there should be no problem if the church agrees to this union.

I believe Mr. Dooley still believes that marriage should not be allowed between same-sex couples because of his religious philosophy, and not based on our laws.

Frank Caruso, Lodi

[Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses the Air District ask valley residents to check before they burn and to please burn cleanly when using their fireplaces. For more information on this Spanish clip, contact Claudia Encinas at \(559\) 230-5851.](#)

Distrito del Aire pide precaución en prender chimeneas

By Kimberlina Rocha

El Sol, Friday, Jan. 2, 2009

Las frías temperaturas quizás le pongan la tentación de pasarse el día calentito junto a la chimenea, pero antes de prenderla, revise si se permite.

Los oficiales del Distrito para el Control de la Contaminación del Aire le piden a los residentes del Valle que se informen a través de un número de teléfono o por el Internet, si es un día en el que se permite quemar leña en su chimenea. Está información cambia diario y está disponible llamando al (800) 766-4463 o por Internet en el sitio www.valleyair.org.

Los dos mensajes que salen, según el clima, son "burn cleanly" que quiere decir "queme de manera limpia" o "wood-burning prohibited", que quiere decir "se prohíbe quemar leña".

Esto se hace para tratar de prevenir más contaminación del aire a través de cenizas, hollín u otro tipo de materia dañina.

Para los días que indica quemar limpio, los residentes deben usar leña vieja y seca o leña fabricada especialmente para quemarse en las chimeneas como Duraflame, dijo Maricela Velázquez, portavoz del distrito.

"También le pedimos a las personas que usen chimeneas que tienen gas natural", dijo.