

Cover Story - September 19, 2014

The road to cleaner air

Commuter incentives, education and wood-burning ban among Spare the Air programs

by Cierra Bailey

Amid the statewide drought, there has been plenty of talk about water conservation. But the drought is not only creating a need for shorter showers and holding back on lawn-watering, it is also contributing to poor air quality.

"Where the drought impacts air quality is with the increased amount and strength of wild-land fires," said Lisa Fasano, communications director for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD). "We have been very fortunate this year that the majority of wildfires in California have been far north of the Bay Area, but we have had some impacts from smoke."

The BAAQMD issues summer Spare the Air alerts the evening before a day when the air is expected to be most unhealthy. On these days, residents are asked to minimize driving by carpooling or taking public transportation to work in order to reduce negative impacts on air quality.

Some of the health risks associated with poor air quality include respiratory and cardiovascular disease, asthma, and irreversible damage to the lungs and heart, according to the BAAQMD.

So far this summer there have been nine official Spare the Air days, the most recent occurring last Friday.

The Spare the Air program, aimed at reducing air pollution, has been the source of controversy for some residents who question its effectiveness, disagree with the wood-burning ban during winter, and criticize the use of public funds for some of the program's projects.

"I am pretty fired up about the Spare the Air situation and think it is ridiculous and a complete waste of our time and money," Pleasanton resident Deryl Sturdevant said.

The Spare the Air program, established by the BAAQMD in 1991, focuses on educating the community and promoting behavioral changes that help prevent air pollution.

The air district is governed by a board of directors consisting of 22 appointed local elected officials from the Bay Area's nine counties. The number of representatives from each county is proportionate to its population. Alameda County has four board directors.

The board can create and enforce regulations to control air pollution, but all rules have to be passed by a majority of the directors. Public hearings must also be held before taking any action to adopt or amend regulations.

Summer Spare the Air season goes from April through October, and the winter season extends from November to February.

"Generally we see more unhealthy smog days when we have high temperatures, but Bay Area-wide we have had a relatively mild summer," Fasano said. "We may still get severe heat in September and October, which could bring more Spare the Air smog days."

Tri-Valley resource team

As part of the Spare the Air effort, BAAQMD developed resource teams that represent the regions throughout the Bay Area. There are currently nine teams that are responsible for facilitating local projects to promote clean air.

The team that represents the Tri-Valley meets bimonthly and is comprised of representatives from the cities of Dublin, Pleasanton, Livermore and San Ramon. Lisa Adamos, economic development specialist for the city of Pleasanton, is the city's resource team representative.

There are also members from other local agencies, including Wheels, 511, ACE Rail and BAAQMD, along with reps from Hacienda Business Park and Bishop Ranch.

In an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the Tri-Valley resource team is currently promoting an "Idle-Free" campaign that asks residents to pledge to turn their car engines off when they're not in use for longer than 30 seconds.

According to Adamos, the project has recently transitioned to a community-based effort. Bookmarks are used to promote Idle-Free at local libraries and other public buildings along with postcards that include instructions on how to sign the pledge.

The Tri-Valley resource team also launched a website earlier this year for the Idle-Free project where visitors can sign the pledge and be entered in a drawing to win gift cards.

Commuting

Another component of Spare the Air is its employer-facilitated program. As registered members of the program, employers agree to notify their staff the day before a Spare the Air alert is issued and educate their employees about ways to improve air quality.

Many Pleasanton businesses -- among the more than 2,000 participants throughout the Bay Area -- are registered for the program, including Stoneridge Shopping Center, ClubSport Pleasanton and the city government.

"We notify our employees with an email when a Spare the Air day is forecasted. We ask that they use commute alternatives or refrain from air polluting activities as suggested by the Spare the Air website or email," Adamos said.

Offering incentives such as free or discounted bridge tolls, awarding gas cards for vanpoolers and commuter tax benefits are some ways businesses encourage carpoolS.

"We offer a taxable cash incentive to our employees if they use a commute alternative on a regular basis, not just on Spare the Air days," Adamos said. "Employees track their commute activity using 511's Trip Diary and are paid on a monthly basis."

"We also offer a 25% monthly non-taxable transit subsidy for employees that use public transportation. Participants are also entered into a random monthly drawing to win \$50 if they have more than 50% participation that month," she added.

As for the regional effort's effect on commuters, Dublin resident Kim Madison said she began taking public transit earlier this month after starting a new job in San Francisco.

"Less pollution, less wear-and-tear on my car and less maintenance I'll have to do later makes taking public transit kind of a win-win," she said. "Traffic causes so much stress driving from (Dublin) into the city and BART really helps alleviate that."

The new Bay Area Commuter Benefits Program was launched this April and requires that businesses with 50 or more full-time employees offer commuter benefits.

California Senate Bill 1339, signed into law in September 2012, authorizes BAAQMD and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to implement the joint pilot program. Companies that fall into the required standard are expected to register by the end of this month.

Hacienda Business Park in Pleasanton has had a comprehensive commuter benefit system in place for more than 30 years, according to its general manager, James Paxson.

"We try to customize what we do," Paxson said. "You really have to spend time talking to people and helping them understand how to use different transit systems. You can't just throw out schedules and expect everyone to get on a bus."

Hacienda's program currently includes a free "Wheels Ecopass" and free "first-time rider" transit tickets for BART, ACE trains and the San Joaquin Regional Transit District bus, among several other resources.

Across the Bay Area, once company is registered for the regional commuter benefits program, it has four benefit options to choose from. Employers can offer a pre-tax benefit, which allows employees to exclude up to \$130 per month from their taxable income.

"One of the great things about our program is that our businesses are automatically compliant with the commuter benefits program under (the regional program's) Option 2," Paxson said of the Hacienda system.

Option 2 allows Bay Area employers to provide a transit or vanpool subsidy to reduce their employees monthly transit costs to a maximum of \$75 a month. The third commuter benefit is to offer free or low-cost transportation to its employees, such as a shuttle service operated by or for the employer.

Lastly, employers can opt to create their own alternative benefit plan. The alternative plan would have to be reviewed by the BAAQMD to determine that it is equally effective in reducing single-person commute trips as the other three options available through the program.

Some alternative options recommended by the BAAQMD include adding preferred parking for carpools and establishing charging stations for electric vehicles.

San Ramon resident Henery Limawan commutes approximately 80 miles every day round-trip from his home to San Jose in his electric vehicle. When his car is fully charged, it runs about 100 miles before needing to be recharged.

"I've had my electric car for a little over a year now and it's more cost saving than getting gas and it's better for the environment and the HOV lanes are a bonus as well," Limawan said.

The parking lot of Fallon Gateway Plaza off Fallon Road in Dublin is equipped with electric-vehicle charging stations and designated parking spaces for clean air vehicles. Limawan said he stops in the plaza on his way to work to charge his car and grab breakfast.

"Overall, my family is trying to go a little bit greener and this (car) really came in handy for us to do that," he added.

Winter Spare the Air

As winter approaches, alternative transportation and reducing smog will remain relevant, but Spare the Air day alerts will be geared more toward what residents are doing in their homes as opposed to how they are getting to and from work.

When a winter Spare the Air alert is called, wood-burning indoors and outdoors is prohibited.

"When we first started the wood-burning ban we got a lot of push-back from the public because they felt entitled -- like an 'all American apple pie' thing (was) to have fires during the holidays," Fasano said.

Among those critics is Michael Austin, a Pleasanton resident who said he has an environmentally-friendly fireplace insert that he can't use on Spare the Air days.

"I purchased a wood-burning insert for my fire place seven years ago. My insert is the latest technology for burning wood cleanly," Austin said. "But there is no incentive for me to burn cleaner because the BAAQMD forbids all wood burning on Spare the Air days, no matter how clean I burn, or could burn."

Wood-burning causes an increased level of particulate matter, which are particles that can bypass the filters in the nose and throat and cause congestion, aggravated asthma, decreased lung function and other health issues, according to BAAQMD officials.

"We are not the only region in California with a winter ban on wood-burning during dry, windless weather conditions. Sacramento, San Joaquin Valley and South Coast air quality management districts all have mandatory no burn programs in the winter months," Fasano added.

There are approximately 1.2 million fireplaces and wood-stoves in homes throughout the Bay Area, according to the BAAQMD. During winter, residential wood-burning contributes to about 33% of the particulate matter in the air.

An average of 15-20 winter Spare the Air days are called, compared to an average of 11 in the summer, district officials said.