

New EPA rules may aid proposed transit projects

BY LESLIE WIMMER

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The Environmental Protection Agency's proposed lowering of ozone emission standards may put a stronger focus on North Texas transportation projects as a way to improve air quality across the region.

While the Dallas-Fort Worth region historically has failed to meet air quality standards set by the EPA, North Texas has cleaner air today than ever before, said Dave Bary, a spokesman for the Dallas office of the Environmental Protection Agency. Bary added that emissions from transportation congestion makes up between 60 and 65 percent of ozone levels in the region.

Area transportation officials expect the EPA's proposal to focus attention on speeding up transportation efforts, including highway expansion and public transportation projects, as a way to keep traffic moving and to help meet the proposed new, lower ozone standard.

The EPA proposed in early January to lower the ozone standard from the current 75 parts per billion to a point somewhere between 60 and 70 parts per billion of ozone, Bary said. The measurement indicates parts per billion ozone measurements in a cubic meter of air.

The agency expects to have a final decision on where to set the new standard by the end of August, Bary said, adding that the decision will be primarily based on public comments. A 60-day public commenting period began after the announcement Jan. 7, and EPA officials are accepting public comments at hearings around the U.S. and on the agency's Web site.

"The agency will select a final level, somewhere between 60 and 70 [parts per billion], and announce that at the end of August," Bary said. "Depending on where the final number is will ultimately determine what the effect will be on businesses and residents in areas like Texas that have traditionally or historically failed to meet the national air quality standard for ozone."

The EPA first set an air quality standard of 125 parts per billion in the early 1970s. Over the next two decades, Bary said officials learned more about issues relating ozone levels to public health and environmental concerns, and the agency decided in 1997 to lower the standard to 85 parts per billion. In 2008, the standard was again lowered to 75 parts per billion, and the latest proposal was first announced in September 2009.

Today, the Dallas-Fort Worth region, which includes nine North Texas counties, is in nonattainment with current air quality standards, said Chris Klaus, a senior program manager with the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

North Texas currently sits at 86 parts per billion, which falls short of the agency's standards, Klaus said, but is the lowest the region's levels have been in years.

"We at one time were at about 101 to 105 parts per billion, and over a very short amount of time we were able to, as a region, bring that level down to 86," he said. "So, I think the region has accomplished a lot, our air is the cleanest its ever been."

After a new ozone level between 60 and 70 parts per billion is selected, the state of Texas will work with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to prepare and submit a plan to the Environmental Protection Agency outlining strategies to lower air quality emissions in Texas' out-of-compliance regions, Klaus said.

Depending on the severity of the region's out-of-compliance standings, once a new level is selected, Bary said the region would have anywhere from 2014 to 2031 to come into compliance with the new standard.

Vic Suhm, executive director of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, said new transportation technologies combined with ongoing highway expansion and public transportation projects in the region will help reduce ozone levels in the future, despite expected population growth.

"I think the big impact, in terms of reducing ozone mostly from mobile source emissions, is going to come from the new technology that's being introduced into the vehicle fleet," Suhm said. "As vehicles turn over, you will be getting vehicles on the highway that get far better mileage, far more efficient engines and you will get hybrids and electric vehicles before long. We're on a path, if you will, that's going to have a substantial impact in a positive way on the level of air pollution from vehicles."

Improvements expected to come from a more efficient vehicle fleet doesn't mean Texas should stop its efforts in moving transportation projects forward, Suhm said, adding that a focus on mixed-use developments and public transportation as opposed to suburban sprawl and commuting will also help lower ozone levels.

From focusing on mixed-use developments "you will start to see less sprawl and new development, which you could say was a characteristic of the development

that occurred over the previous decade,” Suhm said. “Development that will occur in future decades will be more mixed-use, more compact.”

With the state’s growing population and with changing attitudes about public transportation, Suhm said Texas should continue planning and funding highway expansion projects and public transportation projects as a key way to lower emissions.

“You’re seeing already a greater expression of support for public transportation and for rail within metropolitan areas than you’ve ever seen in the past, because people want a choice,” Suhm said. “Not as many people insist upon single-occupant automobiles as a way to get from home to work, as used to be the case. Public transportation is going to play a much larger role in the future than it does today and the truth is it has to because you cannot accommodate the amount of growth that’s going to come to this region with just pouring more concrete.”

lwimmer@bizpress.net