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Fresno nuclear plant: part of energy solution?

Developer says opinions are shifting on controversial topic

Gabriel Dillard — Staff Writer

John Hutson called into a radio talk show recently after picking up a calzone for dinner.

He sat in a parking lot for 30 minutes, debating the benefits of building a nuclear power plant in Fresno. The show aired on Berkeley-based KPFA 88.1 FM — a bastion of liberal programming.

He invited listeners to contact him by email. The host warned him about a deluge of angry

anti-nuclear messages. But not one made it to his inbox. It's possible that no one was listening. But Hutson said it could also be a snapshot of public opinion.

"Opposition to nuclear power in California is nothing more than a cold calzone," Hutson said.

Of course, anti-nuclear sentiment is alive and well in California, where construction of new reactors has been banned since 1976. Questions about safety and waste storage loom large. But Hutson, chief executive officer of the Fresno Nuclear Energy Group LLC, has noticed a softening. Back in 2006, when local business-

men first floated the idea, many asked how anyone could consider pointing Fresno toward a nuclear quagmire.

Fast forward two years to \$4.50-a-gallon gasoline. Natural gas and electricity prices are also northbound. The term "carbon footprint" has entered everyday use. This has led to a discernible change in the gut reaction to nuclear power, Hutson said. Opposition has shifted to genuine curiosity about how it works and what it can offer. People want to get involved, either as investors or cheerleaders, he said.

"There is more interest in nuclear, not so much from high oil

prices but more for the understanding that global warming is serious," Hutson said. "Serious issues take serious thought about serious results."

Awaiting the renaissance

There are about 30 nuclear projects proposed in the U.S., according to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission. All are farther along in the process than Fresno due to the state moratorium.

Proponents predict the beginning of a nuclear "renaissance," when nuclear plants will once again gain favor with energy

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Nancy Eberwein (left), co-owner of Piemonte's Italian Delicatessen in Fresno, is one of many small business owners frustrated with the high cost of health care.

Bills promise relief from health care costs

Rising premiums take a toll on small business owners

Tainese Arceneaux — Staff Writer

When small business owner Nancy Eberwein is asked what she feels about health care premiums, she lets out a long sigh brimming with frustration.

Co-owner of Piemonte's Italian Delicatessen in Fresno, Eberwein has watched in exasperation as her premium rates climbed another 20 percent this year.

The small deli employs 10 people, seven of whose full-time status earns them insurance coverage.

"It is a healthy premium I have to pay every month," she said. "The rates keep climbing

20-25 percent every year."

Help may be on the way. Assemblywoman Sally Lieber's AB 2967 and Senator Ellen Corbett's SB 1300 are being pitched as solutions that would increase transparency about health care costs.

The bills have the potential to cut health care costs by letting subscribers see how much individual procedures cost.

According to Small Business for Affordable Health Care, a coalition of California small business owners and managers, more than 3 million small business employees in

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Consortium aims to boost college access

BoNhia Lee — Staff Writer

Hispanics make up half the population in the Central Valley, but have the lowest rate of attending college compared to other ethnic groups, according to a new report about college access.

The report, "Why Access Matters," was compiled and released this month by the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium. It found Hispanics made up 43 percent of the region's high school graduates in 2006, but only 36 percent of the incoming freshmen at four-year CSU campuses and 33 percent at the University of California, Merced.

On the positive side, the report found Hispanic students are enrolling as freshmen at community colleges at the same rate as white students for the first time. In 2006, Hispanics and whites each made up 37 percent of the incoming freshmen at 19 community colleges in the region.

Hispanics still lag behind whites enrolling as freshmen in the California State University system. In 2006, Hispanics made up 33 percent of the freshmen at CSU campuses, while white students made up 37 percent.

The report was put together to provide consortium members

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and stakeholders with a deeper understanding of college-going trends in the region. The report was distributed to area college and university presidents and chancellors, who will meet in the fall to discuss the findings.

Consortium members hope to develop new ways to prepare students for college, because success in school is seen as a key starting block in creating a highly skilled and educated workforce.

Barriers such as access to finances and information and the lack of an academic and career focus prevent some students from enrolling in college, the report said.

"Education is a critical driver of long-term regional economic growth, and on a personal level it is a major determinant in an individual's success," the report said. "In the Central Valley, too many students must overcome the many hurdles of less comfortable circumstances to attend college."

The consortium was established in 2000 and is made up of 24 accredited community colleges, public and private colleges and universities from the 10-county region between Stockton and Bakersfield.

It is a beneficial partnership, said Chancellor Frank Gornick of West Hills Community College District in Coalinga.

"We're starting to get major funding agencies see the work we are doing and the way we're trying to solve some of the issues in the Valley," said Gornick. "I was pleased to see we had an increase in Hispanic enrollment at the community college level. It's trending in the right direction. We need to keep

moving in that direction."

Other findings of the report include:

- The percentage of associate degrees attained by Hispanic students increased 2.1 percent between 2001 and 2006 and 5 percent among non-white students during the same time.

- Asian students made up 11 percent of the high school graduates in the region, but are 13 percent less likely to enroll at a UC campus and 7 percent less likely to enroll in community college compared to Asian students statewide.

- Ten of 12 regional community colleges met or exceeded their expected transfer rate between 2 and 4 percent.

"We're making some gains in increasing college attendance," said Cheri Cruz, the consortium's executive director. "We still have some work to do in getting students better prepared for college and also to graduate from college."

The consortium operates The College Place, a college resource center at the Manchester Mall to help students and their families prepare for college. Through questionnaires and conversations with participants, the consortium has learned some of the students and their families are low-income or from first-generation backgrounds and lack the right information about college.

They are not familiar with the role of colleges or think it's too expensive and out of reach, Cruz said. They are not provided with information early enough to impact their decisions to plan, enroll and persist in attaining a bachelor's degree, she said.

"We've really touched on a population that has for some reason not been accessing information in a traditional manner," Cruz said, "because maybe they don't know what questions to ask."



Samuel Arciniega helps a student at The College Place, a college resource center at the Manchester Mall.

The report indicates that despite slight gains, access to higher education in the Central Valley is still not equal. The consortium must concentrate on increasing the participation of low-income, first-generation Hispanics and all male populations, the report said.

The report also recommends:

- giving students the opportunity to earn college credits while still in high school through summer programs and other approaches.

- building on high school technical education programs with career education opportunities which earn students credit or course waivers.

- looking for funding opportunities to develop initiatives or career preparation that will increase the percentage of minority participants.

It is important that all students have access to higher education so they are

prepared to work in a knowledge-based economy, said Manjit Muhar-Atwal, workforce programs manager for the Office of Community and Economic Development at California State University, Fresno.

Muhar-Atwal works closely with the consortium. The report, she said, will provide the region's higher education and workforce development work group an opportunity to create initiatives to develop a college going culture, which will lead to a qualified workforce, she said.

"We believe for our region to prosper, workers must have their intellectual skills honed and must be capable of being employed in a knowledge-based economy," Muhar-Atwal said.

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