AIR POLLUTION GRANT
Locals slow to sign up for carpool program

Years in grant to reduce emissions, messenger returns

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SANTA CRUZ — In 2001, a regional agency aimed at reducing air pollution awarded a $28,000 grant to get Santa Cruz County to team up during commutes, reducing traffic and helping the environment.

The award had lofty goals — cut vehicle emissions by 10 tons over the five-year life of the grant by getting 1,000 corporates to sign up through the Regional Transportation Commission, an agency comprised of local elected officials that plans big roles in local transportation issues.

But the region’s education-based program has done little to impact the county’s choked roadways or clean up the air. So far, a total of 20 people have completed enough trips to win the prize duplicated in front of commuters to get them to change their habits — a $25 per card.

“It’s too early to reverse anything that we’ve done so far as results,” said Tegan Spencer, who coordinates the program for the agency. “It’s only preliminary data. We are in the midst of a five year program and we are going full-speed ahead to get the word out.

Regional Transportation Commission officials say the project, which uses the Internet to match prospective commuters, participants complete and document daily carpool round trip, are running five go.

A year after the “Cabs for Carpool” program started, a key wonder folded, a website that showed the program. Agency officials say they are dedicated to getting more people to use it.

So far, just 48 people have signed up, 40 have completed some trips and 32 cards have been handed out.

The RTB and the agency that awarded the grant, the Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control District, both stand behind the program. Though acknowledging it is not a success so far, they also wouldn’t call it a failure.

“The fact is they didn’t get off the ground running,” said Howard Sedman, the air district’s air pollution control officer. “We’re confident that the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission can get to where they need to go based on the plans they submitted.”

One critic is Paul McGrath, owner of local company Rideshelpers. McGrath’s business runs a similar carpooling program, with clients including the county and Cabrillo College. The Cabrillo pilot program was used when the school’s request for air district funding was denied.

“To all possible measures this looks like a failed program,” McGrath said. “It loses its question, how poor would the results have to be for them to have declared this a failure? The program represents a small fraction of the roughly 1.5 million the local air district doles out to Monterey Bay area governments each year.

The city is part of a part of a part of a part of a statewide $10 tax on vehicle registrations enacted through Assembly Bill 230, a 100 year aim at reducing air pollution and some of the drivers of funding for such programs.

 till the grantees see the grant laws over five years, and still have time to improve participation. The RTB and the air district stressed that grants are expected on a pay-as-you-go basis, with about $85,000 of the $120,000 annual cap.

“Do you want to money to them,” Sedman said.

Judy Cusenza, a Cabrillo College institutional research representative who helps oversee the school’s emission reduction programs, bemoans that Cabrillo didn’t win an air district grant, saying it has continued its partnership with Rideshelpers.

With more than 11,000 students, encouraging alternative modes of transportation through Communications, the grant required the agency to contribute $100,000 to programs, to the grant.

RTP officials say they are implementing a marketing plan, and are expecting ads aimed at UCSC and Cabrillo students. They also have a database of more than 1,200 local potential carpools via 511.org, a regional Bay Area transit and traffic program.

“We still believe this is a great program because it’s a nationwide, linked to other counties and available for individuals, workers and students,” McGrath said.

Sedman said the grant isn’t complete yet, and that the air district will assess its performance after the five years are up.

“They have that time,” he said.

Rideshelpers reporter Jason Hopkin on Twitter: @HopkinRideshelpers