



AIR QUALITY

In my role as chairman of the Alamo Area Metropolitan Planning Organization — the regional agency that coordinates and directs hundreds of millions of dollars in transportation funding annually — I will be the first to tell you that we do not want to violate the Clean Air Act. If the San Antonio region is designated in nonattainment of federal air quality standards, we stand to lose significant amounts of federal funds for future transportation projects. This would be a major setback as our population and economy continue to grow.

Yet that is precisely what will happen unless we take immediate action. San Antonio's status as the largest city in the country in attainment of the Clean Air Act is at risk. In 2012 and 2013, San Antonio recorded ozone concentrations of 80 and 81 parts per billion (ppb), respectively, exceeding the 2008 National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS) of 75 ppb. The readings did not automatically trigger nonattainment; rather, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will designate new nonattainment regions after it revises the standard next year, as expected.

The bottom line is the San Antonio region will likely be designated in nonattainment in 2017 unless we commit to significant reductions to our region's ground level ozone.

Other consequences of nonattainment include additional federal permitting and costly emissions controls for new facilities, potentially limiting our ability to attract new employers to the region. And most important, various respiratory and other illnesses arise for residents from high amounts of air pollution — not the direction we want to go in as we continue to make significant improvements in public health.

The top contributors of air pollution within our region are 1) vehicle emissions, 2) energy production and 3) manufacturing and industrial operations. And, as was recently reported in this newspaper, emissions from oil and gas production in the Eagle Ford Shale outside of our region are also contributors.

In June 2011, we announced the accelerated closure of the CPS Energy Deely coal-burning power plant, which will be retired early in 2018, several years ahead of schedule. It will be replaced with the recently acquired natural gas plant. Combined with conservation efforts through CPS' Save for Tomorrow Energy Plan, we are making progress to reduce emissions from energy production.

Several years ago, cement producers in the region implemented a series of voluntary measures to improve air quality. And other initiatives ranging from B-Cycle to hybrid VIA buses to green building strategies all contribute to cleaner air. But clearly it is not enough.

In October, I solicited and received the support of my City Council colleagues to direct staff to conduct a comprehensive review of the city's and the region's air quality efforts. One of the key findings is that the region lacks a strategic plan to remain in attainment of federal air quality standards. With ozone season upon us — the summers of 2014, 2015 and 2016 will likely determine whether San Antonio is designated in attainment in 2017 — we are currently without a regional plan to reduce ozone. This needs to change immediately.

Make no mistake, improving air quality is no easy task. There is no single answer; rather, it will require a combination of solutions and some difficult decisions to get us there. But I, for one, see little choice. This is among the biggest challenges facing our region, and we need a dramatic change in attitude and urgency if we hope to confront it. As chairman of the MPO, I plan to lead that debate.

With vehicle emissions as the biggest contributor, we must take a fresh look at how we can evolve this city to a sustainable multimodal community. When we make investments in our transportation system — either traditional highway, multimodal or bicycle/pedestrian improvements — we must consistently ask the question: How does this investment affect air quality? The clock is ticking.