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Officials swamped with calls seeking odd-even exemptions

By Scott Herhold
Staff Writer

Veneda Gonzales has a problem. As the program coordinator for San Jose's "Meals on Wheels" program, which brings hot lunches to the elderly, she views gasoline lines with dismay.

Because her drivers are often delayed for an hour or more waiting in line with their own cars, the meals are getting cold. Several of her deliverymen have already given notice.

So Ms. Gonzales has joined a host of others who are pushing for emergency status under the odd-even gas allocation plan that went into effect today in Santa Clara County.

The regulations announced by Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr.'s office have prompted hundreds of requests for exceptions from motorists who claim they are sick, needy, or simply befuddled.

On Tuesday, the telephones of county officials were ringing at a pace that gave even such hot issues as gay rights and redwood logging all the fascination of yesterday's city council rezoning.

The Gas Crunch

"We're getting just tons of calls," said Frank Escobar, the head of the county's Office of Citizen Services. "A lot of them are coming from heads of businesses who want to make sure their salesmen aren't turned down."

The odd-even plan, under which motorists may buy gas every other day, allows exceptions for recognized "emergency vehicles," like ambulances, in special "yellow flag" lanes.

The regulations also provide that commercial vehicles may buy gas every day provided their drivers wait in line like everyone else.

But the plan doesn't specifically address the plight of the more than 150 residents who called their supervisors Tuesday to plead special circumstances or suggest changes in the rules.

A San Jose man called Supervisor Dom Cortese to complain that he had to travel to the hospital every day for kidney dialysis. There was no way he could depend on the vagaries of odd-even.

A woman psychologist asked Supervisor Gerry Steinberg's office whether she could use the emergency lanes, pointing out that she was sometimes called away from her office on emergencies.

Another woman called Supervisor Dan McCorquodale to complain that her son would have trouble visiting his dying father because he had to fill his even-numbered car on an odd-numbered day.

The county officials point out that much of the effectiveness of the plan will depend on the gasoline dealers, who are empowered to decide what constitutes an emergency or commercial vehicle.

But even on the other side of the pump, the situation isn't clear. The supervisors Tuesday heard an appeal from a Mountain View car wash owner, Ralph Woodward, who said the lines of "gasoline only" motorists were hurting his business.

The supervisors requested County Executive William Siegel to compile a list of exceptions that could be incorporated in a request for changes to the governor's office.

What about special islands for commercial?