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Curbing vehicle idling saves money, helps air

Unnecessary vehicle idling (when not in traffic) is not just some "fringe concern." It affects our air quality and therefore our health, emits carbon dioxide that causes global climate change, contributes to noise pollution, and affects our pocketbooks by wasting fuel, causing engine component damage and possibly violating the law. All together, it's a harmful practice that occurs all over Vermont, everyday.

Vermont has taken a great first step in tackling this problem with the recently enacted Act 48: The Idling of Motor Vehicle Engines on School Property. This law will help protect students from school bus diesel exhaust. But we need to continue to raise awareness of idling among the masses — individuals and businesses alike.

The business community plays a very significant role in what is at stake with idling. There are two distinct types of idling situations among businesses and institutions. One is fleet-based, the other is entities that serve patrons who tend to idle on the premises.

Fleet-based businesses use light- to heavy-duty vehicles. These vehicles and their operators can have a significant impact on not only our health and the environment, but their company's bottom line. Some of these companies have fleets that number up to 100 or more. That's a lot of gasoline and diesel being used. In this day of tight budgets and increasing fuel prices, fleet-based businesses need to be keenly aware of ways to control fuel costs.

One way to do this is to train operators to limit their idling. There's no way a communications, utility, construction or delivery vehicle should be parked and idling for 30 minutes, especially when no equipment is being operated.

There are some companies that understand this and have instituted idle-reduction policies. One glowing example is Green Mountain Coffee Roasters (GMCR). A few years ago they found that their fleet of trucks was typically idling for 30 percent of their run time. With implementation of their policy, which includes training of operators and monitoring of the truck's engine control module data, GMCR has been able to cut run time idling to 10 percent, saving 5,000 gallons of fuel annually, which means close to \$15,000 a year saved. They are aware of the health and environmental benefits as well. This is a goldmine that other fleet-based businesses cannot ignore.

Businesses and institutions that serve patrons who may be excessively idling their vehicles on the premises (in the parking lot and/or drive-through) also need to be aware of the negative impact caused by idling. From convenience stores to banks, post offices, hospitals, colleges and ski resorts, there is no escaping the fact that this is an ongoing occurrence.

The typical Vermonter might leave his vehicle running and unattended — a violation of the law — while going inside to get coffee and a doughnut. A caravan of buses idle at a ski resort the entire time their riders ski. Vehicles continuously idle in drive-through lines for minutes rather than shutting off and restarting a couple of times. These entities, some as standout members of the community, should also consider implementing idle-reduction policies. This can include, where appropriate, handouts to patrons, educating employees, students and shuttle operators, and posting strategically placed no-idle signs.

Again, some entities that serve patrons are doing something about this. A great model is the Vermont State Employees Credit Union (VSECU). In 2005, the company adopted an environmental mission statement. As part of this mission, VSECU has taken measures to raise awareness of engine idling by their members (patrons). They have handed out information about idling and then recently installed

thoughtful no-idle signs at their Montpelier, Berlin and Williston drive-up ATM locations. This campaign is done in such a way as to not offend VSECU's valued members. In fact, they report that their members are thanking them for implementing this policy.

Result? VSECU has enhanced their corporate social responsibility by taking a leadership role in the welfare of the community. Other businesses can only benefit by joining in this effort.

Whether businesses, institutions or individuals, when our vehicles are not in traffic, let's "turn off the key and breathe free".

Wayne Michaud of Bristol is Director of the Idle-Free VT campaign, www.idlefreevt.org
