

Burlington Says, "Don't Idle Here"

By Courtney Lamdin

May 7, 2007

A red Pontiac Aztek is parked at a gas pump in front of a Burlington convenience store. The car's lights are on, evidence that it is running, but there is no driver. The unattended vehicle has been idling at the pump for more than 10 minutes. Inside the store, the driver slowly dispenses coffee from a thermos, chatting with the clerk, while the Aztek smoothly hums in the dark.

To anyone else, vehicle idling might seem harmless, but it is Stephanie Clark's job to prove them wrong. Clark is an AmeriCorps Vista volunteer for the Burlington Legacy Project, an organization that protects the economic, environmental and social health of the city, according to its Web site. Clark knows that idling a vehicle for 10 minutes uses as much fuel as it takes to drive five miles, and doing this every day uses more than 27 gallons of fuel a year. With gasoline peaking at \$3 a gallon, idling could make a dent in a driver's wallet.

Not only that, but idling in Burlington is illegal and has been since 1990. The Legacy Project has noticed a lack of compliance and enforcement of the ordinance – there has never been a ticket written for vehicle idling in its 17-year history.

In response, Legacy launched Burlington's No Idling Campaign in March to visibly reduce the growing presence of vehicle idling and to educate Burlington residents about its harmful environmental and health effects, Clark says. According to the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, motor vehicles create 53 percent of the total air pollution in Vermont, including carcinogenic and asthma-inducing chemicals like benzene. Burlington's air exceeds the state standard for benzene by 20 times, according to Legacy's Web site.

Although Burlington is considered a relatively "green" city, air pollution is worsening due to the increasing number of vehicles on the road. For a population of nearly 40,000 people, there are 120,000 vehicles that pass through Burlington daily, Clark says. Idling vehicles burn more fossil fuels, emitting 20 times the pollution of a vehicle traveling 32 mph, according to Legacy's Web site.

"If we're able to reduce idling, it does have a significant effect on the air quality and pollution in the city," Clark says. "It's a habit a lot of people have unfortunately."

Jim Flint, a member of Legacy's steering committee and of Idle-Free VT, a grassroots anti-idling campaign, thinks Burlington residents should realize the impact of their driving habits, he says.

"We generate the problem ourselves," Flint says. "The greenhouse gases generated in the

country are increasing with each passing year and that's affecting our air quality close to home."

Sustainable by 2030: Addressing Environment and Health Concerns

By 2030, the No Idling Campaign hopes to improve Burlington's air quality, which doesn't always surpass the federal National Ambient Air Quality Standards, measured several times daily.

"[A 'good' rating] is still not perfect," Clark says. "We're healthy, and we can be healthier. We have a really long way to go."

The problem is exacerbated because Burlington is located between two mountain ranges, enabling pollutants to settle in the basin that is created, Flint says.

Improving Burlington's air quality would be a milestone in maintaining a sustainable community, one that meets its own needs without jeopardizing future generations, Clark says.

"How can you have a sustainable community if you can't breathe the air?" Flint says. "If we want to remain a green city, we have to make some changes to counteract these trends."

One of these is the growing incidence of children with asthma. Currently, it is the third leading cause of hospitalization for children under 15, according to the American Lung Association. Toxic exhaust fumes, especially from diesel engines, can aggravate asthmatic symptoms, Flint says. Repeated exposure can result in lung cancer, he says.

"There are so many reasons [to not idle], Flint says, "but society tends to overlook the impact of our lifestyles as they relate to motor vehicles."

Legacy's campaign aims to educate people about how their habits affect society, Clark says.

The first step was taken in June 2006 when the city council unanimously passed a resolution to restrict idling of city-owned vehicles. In January, Legacy posted more than 150 red and white signs around Burlington that read: "No idling . . . idling pollutes and is illegal."

Enforcement: Police with Stopwatches?

The ordinance – Article III, Section: 20-55(e) - currently prohibits idling a vehicle for more than five minutes between April 1 to Nov. 1, with four exceptions, including refrigerated trucks. The fine is \$45.

Only a uniformed Burlington police officer can issue a ticket for an idling violation, even if the vehicle is parked in a home's driveway, says Walter Decker, deputy chief of Burlington police.

Due to the fact that police answer more than 40,000 calls per year, they may not have the resources to properly enforce the ordinance, he says.

"The issue of enforcing parking or idling are important but fall a little lower on the list of immediate needs," Decker says.

The enforcement problem is magnified due to the time element in the ordinance, he says.

“Absolutely no one is going to stop there for five minutes and watch you idle,” Clark says.

A policeman would have to first drive to the idling scene, wait five minutes with the cruiser running to write a ticket, or drive around and come back, Decker says. This creates even more pollution and is less cost-effective, he says.

An officer on foot patrol, like the parking enforcement team, would be more helpful in maintaining the ordinance, Decker says.

For now, the police have requested 500 “warning” cards and brochures from Legacy to place on the windshield of an idling vehicle.

Legacy wants to get rid of the seasonal exemption to allow the police to enforce and educate all year, Clark says.

“We’re sending a mixed message, saying ‘idling is really bad, but you can do it six months out of the year,’” she says.

Legacy is waiting for the city council to approve a year-round idling ban.

Concerns about extreme temperatures will not be addressed in the ordinance, Clark says, acknowledging that people are more likely to idle in the very cold or hot months.

“Idling doesn’t seem as important when it’s 40 below,” she says. “There’s this older conception that you need to let your car warm up in the winter.”

Wayne Michaud, director of Idle-Free VT, says this isn’t so.

“Unless it’s zero degrees or colder, in less than 30 seconds, you’re going,” he says, explaining how he uses de-icer or a mixture of vinegar and water to speed up the defrosting process.

Others prefer to use remote car starters, which often cause unnecessary idling, Clark says.

“It’s not my place to be telling people, ‘You shouldn’t want a warm car,’” she says of the starters. “If you think that’s comfortable, pollution’s not so comfortable.”

Yet some people feel entitled to enter a warm vehicle on a cold winter morning, Flint says.

“People feel their comfort is more important than the quality of the air,” he says. “People don’t realize they have a responsibility to others about the air they’re polluting. We all breathe the same air.”

Jody Harrington, marketing director at City Market, a natural foods grocery in Burlington, thinks idling is just a bad habit.

“[Idlers are] not willfully killing the planet,” she says. “We’re creatures of comfort. Convenience is a seductive force. It’s easier.”

Harrington was part of the business’ movement to install their own, hand-drawn no-idling sign in the parking lot last winter. It reads: “We’re proud of our atmosphere. Please help us keep it clean.”

“We pride ourselves as being as green a business as possible,” Harrington says. “We have a high standard. It’s a priority for us because it’s a part of our brand, who we are.”

City Market sets a good example for Burlington businesses and drivers, Harrington says.

Still, some residents do not support the No Idling Campaign because they feel it is regulating their lives and is a “socialist Burlington” plot, Clark says.

“It’s not a campaign for political gain,” she says, explaining that Legacy does not have a secret agenda with Mayor Bob Kiss, who supports their cause.

Taxi drivers also may feel threatened by the ordinance because their “On Duty” signs require their vehicles to be running, Clark says, although none of Burlington’s cab companies have issued formal complaints.

Because of these sensitive exceptions, Burlington police are expected to use discretion in their enforcement, Decker says.

Flint suggests a greater emphasis on the state’s unattended vehicle law, which prohibits drivers from leaving a vehicle running without first shutting off the ignition, he says. The 1973 law (Title 23, Subchapter 1111) was designed to discourage motor vehicle theft, but it could be effective in the anti-idling campaign because there is no time limit, he says.

Clark prefers to use education and outreach to get the message across, she says.

“I don’t want to deal with the letter of the law versus the intent of the law,” Clark says. “We just want people to reduce their idling.”

Reducing Your Idling: Does it Make a Difference?

It only takes a turn of the ignition to stop idling, Clark says.

“It’s literally simple,” she says, motioning the extraction of the key. “It’s an easily digestible action.”

But will it work?

There are several indicators to determine just how much Burlington drivers have digested the gist of the No Idling Campaign.

Some of these are quantitative, like the increasing prevalence of asthma, lung cancer, pulmonary disease, the number of “unhealthy” air days and the amount of air toxics recorded over time, Flint says.

Others are more visible, like the hopeful disappearance of the brown haze that settles over Lake Champlain on polluted days, he says.

Clark plans to keep track of progress by making a collection of newspaper clippings and residents’ feedback, whether it is over the phone or in person, she says.

Periodically, Clark will ask corner store owners to complete a survey testing their knowledge of the anti-idling ordinance, she says. This will indicate if Legacy's efforts have penetrated those places where idling is most commonly seen, she says.

Still, Flint doesn't believe that Legacy and the No Idling Campaign alone can spur a significant change in idling habits, he says. More individuals need to speak out and take action, he says.

Clark realizes that her effort is a small one, but she believes in it and hopes that Burlington will gain a positive reputation from its No Idling Campaign, she says.

"If we can reduce idling and reduce pollution because of that, that's good for everybody," Clark says. "[People will say], 'Burlington – you don't idle there. That's that city. That's what they do.'"