

FORUM

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.
— The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

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LET'S KICK THE IDLING HABIT

The Free Press editorial ("Find solutions to car emissions," Sept. 7) dealt with vehicle emissions — the leading pollutant causing climate change — and how this affects not only Vermont's air quality but its tourism economy. This presents a challenge the state of Vermont faces in seeking to set stricter automobile emission standards than required by federal law.

The editorial ends with a plea for improving public transportation across the state. These are laudable goals, but there is another simpler, more attainable goal that can yield results sooner — and not only does it not cost anything to implement — it even saves us money. What could that be? Avoiding unnecessary idling.

I am appalled whenever I see folks idling their vehicles needlessly. I'm talking about a worldly, well-informed member of the community who I witnessed sitting in his car in a parking space with the engine and air-conditioning running minute after minute. And the family

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TURN Michaud

I observed doing their recycling at the drop-off center as their van idled for 10 minutes. The lady shopping in the country store while her pickup idled outside. The cabbie idling at the curb while waiting for a fare. And I've heard or read the stories of idling school buses at schools, with children inside the buses and outside, breathing diesel exhaust.

Why in the world would people let their vehicles idle like this? Idling is a product of people's lack of awareness. We wouldn't knowingly want to cause respiratory illness. According to the American Lung Association, vehicle emissions produce a nasty brew of chemicals that impair our lungs and heart. Children, the elderly and asthmatics are particularly susceptible.

What about wasting fuel? Our idling habit is money right through our exhaust

pipes In this day of ever increasing gas prices.

And here's a surprise: Studies show that idling damages engine components. An idling engine is not operating at peak temperature, resulting in incomplete fuel combustion. Fuel residues can condense on cylinder walls, contaminate oil and damage engine components. Conversely, frequent restarting has little impact on engine components such as the starter motor and the battery.

An finally, idling contributes to climate change — as alluded to in the editorial.

How can we avoid unnecessary idling? Two things need to happen. First, people need to be made aware of the problem. Second, it's time for Vermont to join its neighboring states that already have idle-reduction laws. There are efforts occurring on both these fronts. Idle-free initiatives are taking place on local, regional and statewide levels. On the legislative side, school bus and truck idling bills have been introduced in the past several years but have thus far languished in committee.

In the meantime, here are six things we can do: 1) reduce vehicle warm-up to 30 seconds, even in sub-freezing temperatures (driving away slowly to get lubricants flowing is better for your engine), 2) turn off your engine when you are parked or stopped (except in traffic) for more than 10 seconds, 3) avoid using a remote vehicle starter, 4) consider the purchase of a gas/electric hybrid vehicle which seldom idles when stopped, 5) spread the word to family and friends, 6) write an e-mail or postcard to your representative asking them to consider supporting a Vermont state idle-reduction law.

Don't forget, unnecessary idling wastes money, but even worse, the air we breathe — especially that of our children — is affected. Want more immediate, cost-free results on lowered emissions? Kick the idling habit.

Wayne F. Michaud lives in Bristol and is the coordinator of the statewide Idle-Free VT campaign and petition drive. Volunteers are needed. Information is available at idle-freevt.com.