

• EDITORIAL •

Clear the air with a turn of ignition key

Idling pollutes, and it's illegal

Somewhat unheralded, the Madison Area YMCA conducted an experiment in improving the environment last week.

It asked people in idling cars to turn off their engines.

Why it made sense: When scheduled programs for young people at the YMCA wrap up, there's typically a long line of idling cars outside as parents wait to pick up their children.

Last Monday through Friday, the YMCA Family Center on Kings Road in Madison posted sandwich board signs along the curb of its pick-up and drop-off zone. The signs instructed motorists that while they were indeed welcome to wait in their cars briefly, they had to turn off their engines.

By all accounts, it worked, indicating old habits can change, and people are happy to do the right thing if someone asks.

In this case, the change in habit is obviously good for air quality and young lungs. Less obvious, it's also good for the car's engine. And even less obvious, it obeys state law.

The YMCA's experiment conforms to the experience last November of Chatham Township's Southern Boulevard School, where again a typical day found a long line of cars idling outside at dismissal time.

Long, as in, some 200 parents pick up their children in grades K-3 at the school every day.

The school's Parent-Teacher Organization, however, included an environmental awareness committee, which recognized that while cars idled in the parking lot, children played in the nearby schoolyard, breathing in the polluted air.

Digging deeper, the PTO committee discovered an idling motor also stresses the car's spark plugs, cylinders and exhaust system – not to mention the car owner's wallet at this time of sky-high gas prices.

So, the school mounted a weeklong anti-idling campaign. Children made banners and posters, and the PTO sent information home to parents.

The week was a success. Idling outside the school was reduced virtually 100 percent. And the feedback from parents was, they appreciated being alerted to the health issue, and the harm to engines.

Since 2004, New Jersey law mandates that both gasoline and diesel engines must not idle for more than three minutes. The state has done little to publicize or enforce the anti-idling law regarding cars, but it has promoted the no-idling law with school bus companies. So, when the Southern Boulevard School mounted its anti-idling week, the district also reminded its school bus company that drivers should obey the law.

Some facts:

- Idling a car engine wastes gasoline. Just 10 seconds of idling uses more gasoline than restarting the car.

- Idling is harmful to the engine and exhaust system. It takes just 30 seconds to warm-up a car's engine. When the engine idles, fuel combustion is incomplete and fuel residues condense on cylinder walls, where they contaminate the oil and damage engine components. Condensation in a vehicle's exhaust system can lead to corrosion.

- An idling engine produces twice as much exhaust emissions as an engine in a moving vehicle. Car tailpipes emit carcinogens and other toxins, smog-forming chemicals, and greenhouse gases.

- Children are especially vulnerable to air pollution, breathing more rapidly than adults and inhaling more air per pound of body weight.

- Air quality is often worse in the afternoon; about the time parents arrive at school to pick up children.

- Exposure to air pollutants is higher inside an idling vehicle than at the roadside by the vehicle. The greatest exposure occurs when sitting in traffic congestion on highways, or in a line-up of idling vehicles at a transit stop, at a fast food restaurant - or outside a school, or a YMCA.

Congratulations to the YMCA for challenging a bad habit. This campaign should catch on at all schools, and everywhere motorists idly wait, and idle.