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Burlington restricts car idling

Matt Ryan, Free Press Staff Writer

Burlington recently reduced the time motorists legally can leave their vehicle engines idling, and the city eliminated the law's winter exemption to try to make the air a little cleaner.

The revised anti-idling ordinance, which took effect Dec. 31, cuts the allowed idling time from five minutes to three minutes year-round. The ordinance makes exceptions for vehicles that run refrigeration units or are being repaired, or if the law jeopardizes the health or safety of someone in the vehicle.

The ordinance, though, is not "high on our radar," Police Chief Mike Schirling said. "The population in Burlington tends to be environmentally friendly."

The department's parking division primarily enforces the ordinance, and "the majority of what we do there is educational," Schirling said.

Burlington enacted an anti-idling ordinance in 1990 that prohibited idling for more than five minutes between April 1 and Nov. 2, with the same exceptions. The ordinance did not lead to "very many tickets," Schirling said.

"We did a lot of warning related to idling, but you don't see too many cars idling for an extended period of time, unless it's insanely cold," he said.

The Burlington Legacy Project, a public-private partnership aiming to make the city sustainable by 2030, led the effort to encourage the city's Department of Public Works Commission to revise the ordinance.

Jennifer Green, co-director of the Legacy Project, said her organization endorsed the law in part to keep up with similar laws in other cities and states across the country.

As of August 2009, Connecticut and New York City had three-minute limits on idling, with exemptions, as did Delaware and Washington, D.C., in temperatures above freezing, according to the American Transportation Research Institute. Maine and New Hampshire had five-minute limits on idling, with exemptions, in temperatures above freezing, according to the institute.

Green said she understands the police department's approach to the law.

"They're not going to take themselves away from other duties to stand there with a stopwatch," Green said. "But that said, they are well aware of the policy and are going to stand behind it."

Green said the fine for violators is \$12, the same as for a parking meter violation.

Shaving two minutes off the anti-idling ordinance is "a symbolic change," but one that will get motorists in the habit of turning off their vehicles sooner, said Jim Flint of Burlington, a supporter of

the revision and the executive director of Friends of Burlington Gardens.

“We have to start somewhere,” Flint said. “We’re not talking about days that are 20 degrees below zero, which are rare. We’re talking about days when it’s 40 degrees — is it necessary to keep that car running?”

Burlington’s ordinance does not specifically refer to temperature.

Flint said he worries that people, especially children heading to school, will become ill if they breathe in too much exhaust pouring from tailpipes.

Regarding how idling affects the health of the vehicle, Ray and Tom Magliozzi, the hosts of National Public Radio’s “Car Talk,” advised that in temperatures between 10 and 20 degrees, nearly all modern cars need only a minute or two to warm up and allow the oil to thin out a bit and circulate.

Steve MacNair, owner of Burlington Muffler and Brake, echoed that advice. Waiting more than a few minutes to warm up your car “is more comfortable for you; it doesn’t really make a lot of difference to the engine,” MacNair said.

Free Press Staff Writer John Briggs contributed to this report. Contact Matt Ryan at 651-4849 or burlingtonfreepress.com. To have Free Press headlines delivered free to your e-mail, sign up at www.burlingtonfreepress.com/newsletters.

Additional Facts

Idle banter

How other municipalities and states handle idling. Fines vary widely:

- **Connecticut:** Three minutes.
 - **Maine:** Five minutes if temperature is above 32 degrees, 15 minutes if 0-32 degrees, no limit if below 0 degrees.
 - **Massachusetts:** Five-minute limit.
 - **Minneapolis:** 0 minutes in residential areas between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.
 - **New Jersey:** Three minutes (15 minutes if stopped more than three hours and less than 25 degrees).
 - **New York City:** Three minutes (1 minute if near a public school).
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