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My Turn: Do the right thing and stop idling

By Wayne Michaud

Burlington has taken a small but positive step in improving the quality of life of Burlingtonians by updating the city's no-idling ordinance ("Burlington restricts car idling," Jan. 12). Effective Dec. 31, the maximum idling time allowed went from 5 to 3 minutes, and the winter exemption was eliminated, thereby making the ordinance in force year-round.

This strengthening of the no-idling ordinance follows a campaign of a couple of years ago when many red no-idling signs were posted around the city. Burlington is serious about raising awareness of parked idling vehicles. Enforcement of excessive idling has been lax but is expected to improve as it will be more simply treated like a metered parking violation. The key is not to fill the city's coffers but to educate people to improve our air.

There are basically four challenges to getting cooperation on reducing idling:

To make people aware. Excessive idling wastes fuel and causes needless engine wear, costing each of us up to several hundred dollars annually depending on how much one idles. More seriously, it is bad for our health. Even modern vehicles emit harmful chemicals, such as carbon monoxide, nitrous oxides, benzene and hydrocarbons that cause respiratory illness and asthma. Children and the elderly are most vulnerable. And collectively, excessive idling by each one of us adds up: 2 billion gallons of fuel are wasted by idling cars and trucks in America when we are striving to be more energy independent and less reliant on foreign oil. The same applies for the carbon dioxide in these exhaust emissions that cause climate change.

To cut through the misperceptions. In the last couple of decades, auto manufacturers have made great strides in engine components, making them much easier to warm up, even in colder climates. There is no need to let a light-duty (car, SUV, pick-up) engine idle for more than 30 seconds, with the following cold weather exceptions: if inside window defrosting is not adequate (scrape snow and ice off windows before starting engine), when it's below 0 degrees and when occupants are infants or very elderly. After 30 seconds, the oil has circulated throughout the engine and the vehicle is ready to be driven. Warming up continues as you ease into your drive, which also allows other mechanical components to warm up. And while fuel mileage is below normal during this traveling phase, idling gets 0 miles per gallon. Read the owner's manual. Many actually state to avoid prolonged idling.

To sacrifice a bit of optimal comfort. In the spatial environments of our homes and vehicles, we naturally tend to be accustomed to keeping our bodies in a comfort zone. A fully warmed-up or cooled-down vehicle cabin achieves this goal. Unfortunately, there is a high price to pay for prolonged warm-up idling, using remote vehicle starters or sitting in a parked idling car to keep warm or cool. Responsible people will willingly choose to sacrifice a few minutes of optimal comfort to avoid harming our air quality, wasting America's energy and contributing to climate change.

The motivation of higher fuel prices. The price of a gallon of gas in America is still not conducive to encouraging people to change their overall driving habits. In Europe, where fuel prices are two to three times higher, it is fairly common for drivers to shut their engines off at stop lights to save fuel.

And a growing number of European auto manufacturers offer "idle-stop" technology: nonhybrid vehicles that shut down automatically at stoplights and restart and go seamlessly at the press of the accelerator. This technology has yet to arrive here. Higher fuel prices are a hardship for many, but the silver lining is changes in our driving habits, including carpooling, public transportation and less idling.

Yes, Burlington is serious about getting us to reduce our idling. Do the right thing (and obey the law, too). Turn off the key and breathe free.

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