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No downtime for anti-idle activist

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Wayne Michaud has been waging war against car idling. For starters, he says, it wastes gas, creates a health hazard and even damages the engine. (RYAN MERCER, Free Press)

Idle hands are the devil's tool, goes the old saying. To Wayne Michaud, idling vehicles are about as bad.

Michaud, of South Starksboro, is the director of Idle Free Vermont, with a purpose of stopping people from letting their cars run as they try to warm them up on cold mornings, duck into the store for coffee, wait in line at the drive-through at a fast-food restaurant -- or just about any other situation where the engine would be left running for longer than seconds.

Idling gets under Michaud's skin. He says it wastes gas, increases our dependence on foreign oil, is expensive, pollutes the air, contributes to global warming and causes excess engine wear.

Michaud relies on data from sources such as the American Lung Association, the U.S. Department of Energy and the federal Environmental Protection Agency for many of his claims, and cites the organizations on his Web site, www.idlefreevt.org

Michaud's anti-idling quest continues almost any time he sees a driver sitting in a stopped vehicle with its engine running. It's not his style to be confrontational; he's been reluctant to pick a roadway fight for decades, ever since an unfortunate highway incident involving an impolitic gesture (him) and a sledge hammer (the other guy) -- but that didn't involve idling.

These days, if he has literature about idling with him, he simply strolls over.

"I just say, 'I happen to be running a campaign. Just take this information and look it over and you might find it interesting,' and I just leave it at that," he says, adding that most people react mildly. "They just kind of read the information, but they don't comment on it too much. Some might sheepishly say they'll turn off their motor."

Fast-food drive-through lanes really stick in Michaud's craw. He suggests parking the car, getting out and walking into the joint.

"If you're going to have a 900-calorie Big Mac, you might as well get a little exercise," he says.

Michaud doesn't like remote vehicle starters, either. The car clicks on, then sits in the driveway while the owner sips coffee inside. Wasteful, he says. Even on particularly cold mornings, a 30-second vehicle warm-up is plenty, he advises.

His no-idling campaign began in 2005, when he was at a Chittenden Solid Waste District drop-off center. The center is one of those places where responsible, environmentally friendly people go to make sure anything in their trash that can be recycled is recycled. But some visitors let their vehicles idle. One van sat running with no driver for nearly 15 minutes.

The irony was not lost on Michaud.

The experience led to his decision to create his Web site, which lists all the reasons Michaud thinks idling is bad and carries fresh information about idling news and updates on anti-idling rules.

One of his first victories came at the Solid Waste District drop-off centers: Managers erected signs discouraging idling shortly after Michaud noted the idling van.

His idea is gaining traction. Burlington beefed up an existing anti-idling ordinance in 2007. More than half a dozen other Vermont communities, such as Brattleboro, Plainfield, Richmond and Stowe, have adopted anti-idling resolutions. The Vermont Legislature has passed a law banning school-bus idling, which Michaud says is particularly bad because diesel-fume-belching buses can endanger children's lungs. Broader anti-idling legislation is pending.

Whether Michaud has anything to do with it, other cities across the nation are cracking down on idling, too. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg earlier this year pushed through an ordinance restricting idling, though his own vehicles were caught idling for long periods after the law passed. Bloomberg has since apologized and said the idling would stop.

Michaud says he receives inquiries from distant states and cities, and his Web site had 2,780 visitors in July, a record high.

Michaud keeps tabs on as many idling incidents as he can. He noted a recent letter to The Burlington Free Press that described Department of Public Works vehicles idling in apparent violation of the city's anti-idling law.

Municipal vehicles with emergency lights or vehicles that must run to operate electrical equipment are exempt from the no-idling law, says Pat Buteau, an assistant Public Works director. "We try not to randomly idle," Buteau says.

In any event, Michaud says he's been in contact with Burlington police about alleged idling violations. He says police have been great but also told him officers risk having their cruisers idle as they investigate idling complaints. In other words, enforcement can be counter-productive.

Michaud keeps slugging away. Anti-idling initiatives seem to pop up everywhere. Near a construction site at Jay Peak Resort last week, cars and trucks sat silently near a sign that read, "No idling. Lungs at Work."

Ah yes, a resort after Michaud's own heart.

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