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By Mike Eldred

JERICHO- A bill signed into law by Governor Jim Douglas last month may help clear the air around Vermont schools.

Douglas put his signature on Act 48, which prohibits the idling of engines on school property except under extraordinary circumstances, at a special ceremony at Browns River Middle School in Jericho. Students at the school, led by teacher Patty Brushette, were instrumental in getting the law passed, according to Wayne Michaud, Director of Idle-Free VT. "They were the people most involved in this," Michaud says. "The students studied the issues and testified in the Legislature." Michaud's organization provided the middle school group with input on idling issues.

Effective immediately, school buses are prohibited from idling their engines at any school in Vermont while waiting for students to board or exit the bus. The law does allow the state board of education to provide limited exceptions to the rule. Exceptions may include a period of idling when defrosting or defogging is necessary for safe operation of the bus.

Barry Gerdes, of Halifax, owner of Gerdes Transportation, provides bus transportation for students in several Deerfield Valley Towns. He says the new law won't have a big impact on his drivers. "That's something we were already doing before the law," he says.

Because of a medical concern at Twin Valley High School, Gerdes instituted a "drop and drive" policy at the school to minimize the amount of time buses would spend in front of entrance doors and classroom windows. When buses aren't moving for more than a couple minutes, Gerdes shuts them down. "The only problem I can see is when the buses have to run to defrost the windows," he says.

Although the law has been dubbed a "bus idling law," Act 48 also requires the state board of education to adopt a no-idling policy for all vehicles on school property, including vehicles belonging to parents, teachers, and visitors. The state board has until January 2008 to have a model policy ready for local school boards.

The reduction in idling will save money (up to \$300,000 per year, advocates say), reduce fuel consumption, and cut greenhouse gas emissions. But for Addison County Senator Claire Ayer, of Weybridge, who introduced the bill, the top issue was the health of students. According to the bill's supporters, diesel exhaust dissipates slowly, and Ayer says younger students in particular, who are closer to tailpipe level, can suffer serious health effects as a result of breathing the fumes. She noted that one Vermont school curbed school bus idling because students were getting sick from exhaust being drawn into the building's ventilation system.

"It was really a health decision," Ayer says, "but it was also about money and solid environmental policy."

Convincing her fellow legislators to consider a law limiting the time-honored tradition of "warming up" wasn't easy. "When I was growing up, one of the jobs we had as teenagers was to go out and start the car in the winter," Ayer says. "It used to be that diesel engines had to

run longer than cars, but one of the things we heard in testimony is that that's no longer true." Ayer also noted that testimony from truck and bus drivers suggested that idling was not a preferred method of keeping cabin space heated.

From Act 250, the landmark land use law of 1971, to Act 520, this year's pending global warming legislation, Vermont is known for its strong environmental policy. But despite Vermonters' reputation for environmentalism, Michaud says the state has among the highest per-capita transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions in the United States. "Double the national average," Michaud says. "Overall, Vermont is still one of the lowest states for greenhouse emissions, but transportation accounts for 46% of our total. The national average is 26%. It's a reflection of our dependence on transportation."

It isn't uncommon to see idling cars in parking lots keeping passengers comfortable on hot or cold days, or vehicles left running while drivers load or unload cargo. Michaud says he became an advocate for anti-idling regulation after seeing one too many vehicles left idling unnecessarily. "I saw a guy leave his van idling for about 10 minutes while he was using the recycling center," Michaud says. "I was just appalled."

Michaud wrote a letter to the company that runs the recycling center and, to his surprise, the company instituted a "no idling" policy for their drivers and for users of their recycling sites, and posted signs at each of their centers. "I felt like there was real power for one person to affect change," Michaud says.

Idle-Free VT, the organization that grew out of Michaud's epiphany, advocates legislation limiting the time any vehicle is allowed to idle, with exceptions for vehicles in traffic, emergency vehicles, and safety.

He notes the state already has a law prohibiting drivers from leaving running vehicles unattended. "There are 563,000 registered vehicles in Vermont," Michaud says. "If every Vermonter reduced their idling by five minutes per day, it would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 62,000 pounds per year. I think that's significant."

For more information visit www.idlefreevt.org