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Middlebury mulls idle-free policy

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By **JOHN FLOWERS**

MIDDLEBURY — Middlebury selectmen later this month will consider a new “idle-free” policy calling upon motorists to switch off their vehicle engines when they are not traveling.

The new policy is being pitched by the Middlebury Area Global Warming Action Coalition (MAGWAC), an ad hoc citizens group that is working on ways to reduce the community’s carbon footprint. The group reasoned the town could significantly cut greenhouse gas emissions — as well as look after the collective health of its citizens — by adopting an idle-free policy.

“MAGWAC is urging the board of selectmen to establish a strong policy,” said Laura Asermily, the group’s coordinator. “We have given them something they can revise as they see fit.”

Selectmen are scheduled to discuss the draft policy — which would depend on voluntary compliance by citizens — at their Nov. 27 meeting. It would call for an idling limit of three minutes in any 60-minute period for any gasoline-powered motor vehicle designed for public roads, and five consecutive minutes of idling in any 60-minute period for diesel-powered vehicles.

The policy includes exceptions to the rule in cases where the vehicle is forced to remain motionless on a public road because of traffic conditions over which the operator has no control; the vehicle is being used as an emergency vehicle in an emergency situation; the vehicle’s engine is providing auxiliary power for activities other than heating or air conditioning, such as loading, refrigeration, well drilling, or farming; running the vehicle’s engine is necessary for maintenance, servicing, repair, or diagnostic purposes; running the vehicle’s engine during adverse weather conditions is necessary to ensure the safe operation of the vehicle; or the ambient air temperature is below 20 degrees Fahrenheit for gasoline-powered vehicles; below 32 degrees Fahrenheit for diesel-powered vehicles, and idling of the vehicle is necessary to ensure the safety or health of the passengers or driver.

Asermily said the proposed policy is patterned after idle-free initiatives that have been passed in Massachusetts, Hawaii and some Canadian provinces. It’s a policy that is also supported by the Bristol-based group “Idle-Free Vermont,” which lobbied successfully during the last legislative session for a new state law regulating the idling of school buses. That law, which took effect this past May, states that “the operator of a school bus shall not idle the engine while waiting for children to board or to exit the vehicle at a school and shall not start the engine until ready to leave the school premises.”

Starksboro resident Wayne Michaud, founder and director of Idle Free Vermont, said Middlebury would join some exclusive company if it were to adopt an idle-free policy. He said that to his knowledge, only two other Vermont communities have taken some action on the issue of vehicle idling — Brattleboro this past spring approved a resolution on the matter, while Burlington has adopted an idle-free ordinance. Burlington’s law prohibits motor vehicle idling for more than five minutes in any area of the city from April 1 to Nov. 1, except in cases involving refrigeration trucks, repair vehicles and if a motorist’s health

and/or safety depends on keeping a stationary vehicle running.

Michaud said Middlebury deserves some kudos.

“I obviously think it’s wonderful they are considering (a policy),” Michaud said. “It’s a great local effort.”

Asermily has already begun talking to area schools about the policy, which — given the new state law — would largely relate to parents picking up and dropping off their children. Mary Hogan Elementary School has already established its own policy. MAGWAC officials hope to convince local schools, businesses and other entities to follow one common policy.

Boosters of the proposed idle-free policy also hope to enlist the support and participation of Middlebury College. College spokesperson Sarah Ray said the college is receptive to the idea.

“The college does not have a formal policy related to idling but it does have a practice of asking truck drivers that come to the college’s facilities building to turn off their engines,” Ray said. “The college has committed to becoming a carbon neutral institution by 2016 so the college is definitely concerned with carbon emissions and how to reduce them.

“Should the town adopt a policy related to idling, the college will do its best to comply,” Ray said.

LOCAL BUSES ON BOARD

Addison County Transit Resources (ACTR) is already on board, having established its own policy for its vehicles in September. The policy calls for ACTR buses to not idle for more than three minutes at bus stops and at schools. The agency’s drivers are also instructed not to leave buses idling and unattended under any circumstances.

“We’ve always looked at one of public transportation’s roles as being as environmentally responsible as possible,” said Jim Moulton, ACTR’s executive director. ACTR is already using B-20 biodiesel to power its vehicles that have diesel engines. Eventually, the agency’s entire fleet will be diesel-run, operating on B-20, Moulton said.

He noted ACTR adopted its idling policy in view of the new state law governing idling by school buses.

“We thought ... it was important for us to be proactive and consistent with the law,” Moulton said.

Middlebury selectboard Chairman John Tenny said he would support an idle-free policy, but not an ordinance at this point. He noted the potential difficulties in enforcing a no idling law.

“We don’t want to be too hard and heavy-handed at this juncture,” Tenny said.

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