

Sustainable Belmont: Put your best foot forward to help clean the air

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BELMONT, MASS. - All too frequently, we lose sight of the fact that walking, a skill we learn as toddlers, is good for our health, our wallets, and our environment. Belmont residents are fortunate to be within walking distance of many schools, stores, bus stops, and train stations, yet many people drive these short distances. This contributes to traffic congestion; driving children to school can account for up to 25 percent of morning traffic. It also takes a toll on the environment.

Driving is a major contributor to air pollution and is the second leading source of global warming emissions in the United States. Recent studies have found that, to avoid the most dangerous consequences of global warming, we must reduce global warming emissions 80 percent below current levels by 2050. Taken over time, this is equivalent to approximately a three to four percent emissions reduction each year. By driving just 12 fewer miles per week, the average person could achieve this goal.

For these reasons, Sustainable Belmont's Cleaning the Air Campaign is working with others in the community to help Belmont become a more walk- and bike-friendly community. On Wednesday, Oct. 3, all four Belmont elementary schools will celebrate International Walk to School Day. Children and their families will meet "celebrity walkers" at designated intersections and walk to school together. International Walk to School Day is a wonderful opportunity to encourage families to discover the ease and benefits of walking their children to school. Parent volunteers at each school are coordinating this event, and others throughout the year, to support this objective.

Many parents are also working together to create "walking school buses" in their neighborhoods. Walking school buses are groups of children who walk designated routes to school under adult supervision, picking up kids along the way just like a bus. By creating these active and safe routes, walking to school can be a safe, fun, and healthy part of a child's daily routine. Key goals of Belmont's walk-to-school initiative are to increase awareness of the importance of regular physical activity for children, improve pedestrian safety, and foster a healthy and walkable community environment.

Not everyone can walk everywhere all of the time. Drivers are encouraged to carpool, drive as efficiently as possible, and avoid unnecessary idling. Environmental Protection Agency guidelines suggest turning off a car's engine after just 10 seconds of idling to save fuel, avoid pollution, and reduce wear and tear on engine parts. Idling your vehicle for longer than 5 minutes is, in most instances, against state law.

While turning off your engine seems like a small action, our collective efforts can make a difference. According to the American Lung Association, if we reduce our daily idling by only a few minutes, we could eliminate 60 pounds of air pollutants per vehicle per year. Multiplied by the thousands of vehicles registered in Belmont, the potential for reduction in air pollution is huge. Less air pollution also means fewer and less severe cases of asthma, respiratory infections, and allergies; fewer school day absences; and fewer emergency room visits, hospital admissions, and premature deaths.

The Board of Selectmen, Belmont Public Schools, Health Department, Department of Public Works, Community Development Office, and the Police Department all endorse Belmont's anti-idling initiatives. The town has erected anti-idling signs and is active in educating equipment operators on town construction sites not to idle as well.

So, this fall please join together and do your part for cleaner air. Leave your car at home when possible; if you must drive, share the ride, and turn off your engine when parked. And most importantly, share these tips with others; together, we can make a difference.

For more information about the Cleaning the Air Campaign or to get involved, e-mail sustainablebelmont@gmail.com.