

COMMENTARY; SUSTAINABLE MARBLEHEAD: LIFE AND BREATH

By Judith Black / Sustainable Marblehead

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Marsha sat in the emergency room, rocking six-year-old Sarah Ann on her lap as the little girl heaved back and forth, her dark curls flying as she struggled to breathe.

“It appears that your daughter is having an asthma attack,” the nurse said. “Did she use her nebulizer or did you give her an oral corticosteroid?”

Marsha is ready to explode.

“She’s never been diagnosed,” she responds curtly. “This is the first time...”

A call is made, and within minutes the little girl, terrified and now crying between gasps, is treated by a young physician. Once Sarah Ann is stabilized and begins to calm down, so does Marsha, who explains how happy and healthy Sarah Ann is, except, and now the light goes-- at school pick-up.

“When I pick her up, I’ve noticed some wheezing, but that started during the winter, and I assumed it was just a response to the cold because it would clear up after a short while home.”

When the doctor asked her to walk through an average pick up Marsha said she picks her up outside.

“I’m always stuck in this interminably long line of cars that, one by one, pull up to the curb and have their child jump in. It can take 5-15 minutes to reach her which is why people come early.”

Marsha explained that people will start to line up as early as 30-minutes early and they usually let their cars idle.

“Many people are unaware of this, but when your car is idling, it’s emitting nitrous oxides and volatile organic compounds,” said the doctor frowning. “When these molecules react with sunlight and oxygen they form ozone. Breathing in high levels of ozone can cause wheezing and coughing, asthma attacks, and increased susceptibility to respiratory infection. Exposure to ozone over a long period of time can make your allergies worse, decrease lung function, and increase the risk of heart attacks. Your daughter was breathing in this air while she was waiting for you.”

Marsha made a silent promise to herself, her child, and every other small human, to get her entire town to stop idling.

Like Marsha, it’s time for the town of Marblehead to take idling seriously. When you’re sitting in your vehicle in cold or hot weather, it may feel like a small thing to keep the heat or air conditioner running, as you wait for your child, run a quick errand, or pull over for a conversation with a neighbor or friend. You can’t see the hundreds of others doing the same thing or observe the gasses and other byproducts your car is emitting, contributing to ground level ozone, negative air quality, and the greenhouse gasses smothering our planet.

Possibly this is why we have not taken concerted collective action.

Until it’s your child who cannot breathe, or your home ruined by wind, flood, or fire, or your food sources destroyed by repeated droughts, these issues can feel far away. Alas, they are quite close, and one of the many things that individuals can do to improve our air quality and protect the health of our children and grandchildren is to please stop idling your car.

Some Simple Facts:

- Little lungs breathe faster than fully formed ones. They also are closer to the tail pipe, so that children take in more of the pollutants from the car exhaust.
- According to Popular Mechanics, your car does not need to be “warmed up”, even in winter.

- By not idling you keep three pounds of carbon pollution per month from going into the atmosphere.
- Idling vehicle engines operate inefficiently. If an engine runs longer than 10 seconds, it is better and cheaper to just turn the engine off. By eliminating just five minutes a day of voluntary idling, a typical family can save more than \$200 per year in fuel and wear and tear costs.**
- Idling creates worse emissions than driving. This is because idling vehicles emit higher levels pollutants when idling.

Not to mention, idling for more than five minutes is against the law. You can be fined \$100 for your first ticket and \$500 for each one after that.

Finally, idling could be reduced enormously if children were empowered to walk or bike to and from school. To this end, SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL, a state and federal program designed to help local communities make walking and biking to school safer, is coming to town. If you would like to learn more about the program for your child's school contact: Judith Crocker MBA | Outreach www.mass.gov/safe-routes-to-school | Judith.Crocker@dot.state.ma.us

Meanwhile, please stop idling.

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