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Changing our behavior will improve air quality

We have a problem with the air quality in the Treasure Valley — a growing problem that can no longer be ignored. It's estimated that 11 million miles are driven each day in the Valley, and those vehicles are emitting harmful emissions that chip away at our quality of life. There are more cars driving more miles than ever before and the numbers will continue to increase over the next 20 years.

Sooner — not later — we must change our behavior. We shouldn't wait until it's a crisis and our quality of life and economy are damaged. We should learn from communities that went through similar growth spurts decades ago. We can take advantage of the problems they encountered and the solutions they found.

State lawmakers made the right decision to form the Treasure Valley Air Quality Council, which was charged with creating a plan to improve our air quality. The council will make a presentation to the Legislature in February after two more public hearings this month.

The lawmakers asked for this report and now they must act on it. They should invest resources, promote awareness and protect the environment. Government can't shoulder all the responsibility. Businesses should encourage conservation and individuals must do their part. Even a 1 percent decline in miles traveled will cut pollution by 2.2 tons a day.

Council recommendations

The 14-member council has met regularly for a year and developed a plan to improve the Valley's air quality. Leaders must take the recommendations seriously and work to implement them. Some highlights of the plan include:

1. Specific changes in the way we test emissions so we are more efficient and effective;
2. Recover vapors at gas stations;
3. Ensure air quality ordinances are up to date and consistent;
4. Enforce the open-burning ordinances in cities and counties;
5. Support funding for alternate forms of transportation;
6. Design and fund a strategic education and awareness campaign;

7. Be wise with land-use planning, encouraging mixed-use subdivisions and discouraging sprawl.

8. Encourage businesses to offer incentives to employees for taking the bus or carpooling.

What you can do

Vehicle emissions are a main contributor to poor air quality and must be reduced. The most effective way to reduce emissions is to drive less. It's not realistic to ask every driver to carpool to work every day. However, there are realistic and easy steps that will reduce emissions, including:

- Walk or ride a bike for errands;
- Carpool or walk for lunch or coffee break;
- Plan one trip a day from your household;
- Refuel when it's cool;
- Don't top off your tank when refueling;
- Keep your vehicle properly tuned;
- Minimize idling. Do you turn off your car when waiting in a drive-through restaurant or outside your child's school?

Conner Madigan, 13, and Aaron Madigan, 9, are stellar examples of making small sacrifices for the greater good of the community's air quality. Because they attend a charter school, there is no school bus transportation from their home, which is about three miles. Their mom asked them to think creatively about getting to school every day. Was there another mode of transportation beside their family vehicle?

The boys decided it was an easy bike ride on nice days and they researched public transportation and found they could take the bus along with commuters. They ride the bus into Downtown and transfer to a second bus to get to school, but they are saving gas money as well as our air quality.

If they can do it, so can others. Our air quality is getting worse, and the trend will continue if we don't do something now. Protect our quality of life by protecting our air.