

Our View: Let's use draft air quality report to change

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If we want to pass on clean air to the 825,000 people expected to live in Ada and Canyon counties in 2030, we need to pay a few bucks when we register our cars.

And pay more attention to how our behavior makes bad air worse.

And pay more than lip service to regional coordination.

This is part of the to-do list from a forward-thinking, well-researched report on the future of the Treasure Valley's air.

The Treasure Valley Air Quality Council doesn't just quantify a crisis that looms like stale air during a December inversion. After all, it's time for solutions. Bad air can cause health effects ranging from irritated eyes to cancer and respiratory damage. And the federal government is looking at tougher air quality standards — which the Valley might not meet — and these rules could curtail road construction and stifle business expansion.

This council offers good ideas deserving thorough debate — in the next few months, during the fall elections and during the 2007 legislative session.

a better plan for emissions testing

The council's best suggestion may be its most controversial one: expanded vehicle emissions testing.

The new program would cover all motorists in Ada and Canyon counties — a big improvement over the current program in Ada County. Some Canyon County residents will grumble, but it's past time for valleywide testing. Air pollution ignores county lines. Throngs of Canyon County residents drive to Ada County every day to work or shop. And as the Valley grows, the growth marches westward; the Census Bureau projects Canyon County's population to increase by 104 percent between 2000 and 2030, compared to "modest" 85 percent growth in Ada County.

The new program would sniff out the "blue smokers," the fraction of cars accounting for the bulk of the exhaust problems. Remote sensors along highways would identify these high-polluting vehicles. A remote camera would shoot the license plates of the offending vehicles, and owners would get postcards telling them to take their cars in for tests.

Newer models — 1996 and later, accounting for three-fourths of the miles driven in the Valley — would be covered by a simple test of on-board diagnostic equipment. The cost would be modest, perhaps a \$5 add-on to vehicle registration fees. Today, Ada County drivers pay \$15, and decry the free ride enjoyed by their

Canyon County neighbors.

Significantly, the new plan has made a believer out of Canyon County Commissioner Matt Beebe, an air quality council member who opposed a 2004 state bill to require Canyon County emissions tests. "I see it as being far less intrusive, and if you don't have a problem, you're never going to get a postcard."

Rethinking our roles

This plan requires us all to rethink our place in the Treasure Valley's airshed — where the 6,000-foot peaks of the Boise Front can keep bad air socked in. The council has some sensible suggestions here as well:

- The state Department of Environmental Quality could spend \$100,000 a year on education programs designed to help Valley residents change how they drive or use wood stoves during air quality alerts. DEQ would set up a program to reward employers who encourage workers to carpool, bike or take the bus — using incentives, not sanctions, to get businesses to pitch in.
- The council wants local governments to replace a patchwork of open-burning and dust-control regulations with matching ordinances. The council also wants coordinated land-use policies that foster public transit and create pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods.

Will people bike or take the bus during summer heat waves, when ozone levels creep up? Will employers encourage workers to leave their cars at home? Will local governments — which covet their autonomy, often at the expense of cooperation — get on the same page?

The answers will affect the air we share in the Valley.

ReAd Up, Speak up

As the council unveiled its plan Friday at a Meridian park, a shroud of ozone blocked views of the Owyhee Mountains to the south and the Foothills to the north.

The haze provided a clear reminder that the Valley's periodic air quality problems — ozone in the summer, inversions in the winter — require attention now. "This community is very good at studying things and then putting the studies on the shelf," said Pete O'Neill, a Boise developer who chairs the council.

The next step rests with Valley residents. Read the report. Make suggestions on how to make its good ideas better.

Ask county candidates what they'll do to follow through. Ask legislative candidates if they'll support the plan when it comes before the 2007 Legislature.

It's your air. You breathe more than 3,000 gallons of it a day, and every year, you'll have to share it with more neighbors.

Make it your cause.

To learn more

The Treasure Valley Air Quality Council, a 14-member council appointed by former Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, has issued its draft report.

The council will put together a citizen's committee to review the report, and take public comments for 90 days. You can ask for a copy of the report at info@treasurevalleyair.org or by calling 388-3800, or go to [Idaho Statesman.com](http://IdahoStatesman.com) to link to the report.

The council's final report will go to the 2007 Legislature for approval.