

GREENWOODS, HKUSU Newsletter Volume 3

停車熄匙
Switch off Idling Vehicles



Legislation on banning idling engines

In July this year, an 81-year-old minibus driver died from heat stroke in Mong Kok light bus terminal while waiting for passengers with the idling engine turned off. This incident aroused more opposition from the transport sector towards the legislation on banning idling engines.

Environmental Protection Department has launched a public consultation on the legislative ban on idling vehicle engines in November, 2007. In recent months, the department started the discussion of the Motor Vehicle Idling (Fixed Penalty) Bill in the Legislative Council hoping to reduce heat and noise released by idling engine and to improve air quality. Coincidentally, a minibus driver died from heat stroke which might be caused by switching off idling engine. This incident has adversely affected the passage of the bill.



The transport industry exclaimed that turning off idling engine is hard to be endured. They proposed to exempt commercial vehicles such as taxi, minibus, coach and light truck. Also, they pointed out that turning the engines on and off frequently will accelerate the wearing and aging of the mechanical parts. Moreover, more air pollutants will be emitted when restarting the engine than when traveling.

However, scholars and doctors hold opposite opinions. Scholars explained that since Hong Kong is full of tall buildings, automobile exhaust will retain in air and cannot diffuse. Newspaper vendors, shop assistants, passengers queuing at bus stop and pedestrians on the street can only tolerate and continuously breathe in harmful air pollutants. They hope that the industry can understand the feelings of other road users. Idling engines will also cause fuel residue and condensed water remain in the engine. This will make the lubricating oil in the engine deteriorate and speed up the wearing of the mechanical parts. Besides, six doctor associations in Hong Kong and a few doctors cosigned an open letter urging the Legislative Council to pass the bill as soon as possible to protect the health of children, the aged and pedestrians.

According to Hedley Environmental Index published by our University, on average 2 people die earlier than usual due to air pollution. According to a research on turning off idling engines conducted by "Clear the Air", it is revealed that there is a strong association between air pollutants and severe respiratory diseases and vehicles are one of the major sources of air pollutants. The research points out that idling engine will also affect the health of drivers. It is because the air pollutants produced while idling engine would return to the car body through the ventilation system.

In the busy streets, although we do not know other people around us, all of us are breathing the same air. There is no any difference between inside or outside a car. We share the air at the roadside. This is also the thought which drove the legislation of the ban of idling vehicle. As the air is our shared asset, every road users should try to think more from others' perspective. We should collaborate and make an effort to maintain the air quality at the roadside, the health of every citizens and our earth.



Although this law aims to improve the environment and should be well accepted, recently it becomes notorious. Since the death of the driver mentioned above, the society starts to simplify and polarize this issue. The well-being of drivers and public interest are placed at two extremes. It is claimed that switching off idling engines would hound drivers to death. Some people request the termination of the legislation. If this is so, would the original notion "to think more from others' perspective" still exist? In fact, the Government has already granted different levels of exemptions to various public transports. As long as there are adequate exemptions to show the sympathy to drivers, there should be no conflict between drivers' well-being and public interest. Both of them should be considered. The discussion of the Motor Vehicle Idling (Fixed Penalty) Bill started three years ago until now. Should it be abolished at the last moment due to technical problem?

While you are sitting in the car enjoying cool air from the air conditioning, could you please also consider the feelings of other people near your car? Try to think at others' perspective instead from your own only. According to the research conducted by "Clear the Air", commercial vehicles make up 90% of idling vehicles in a year. What is the use of the law if these vehicles are exempted? In some foreign cities such as cities in US, UK, Canada and even those in Japan and Singapore which are as hot and moist as Hong Kong, idling has already been banned. As a well-developed city, why cannot Hong Kong do the same? We hope that the Government can complete the research on the feasibility of the exemption of the ban when very hot weather warning or rainstorm warning is hoisted. We wish that the Government and the transport industry can come to compromise as quick as possible and save the dying earth.

It is true that we cannot expect poor air quality in Hong Kong can be solved simply by switching off idling engines. Yet, it is our first step. The society also need to discuss seriously the policy encouraging uncontrolled increase of vehicles, the rising number of screen buildings or the franchised bus companies which refuse to replace old engines. There is still a long way for Hongkongers to breathe fresh air. If the bill can be passed, the determination of the public to reduce air pollution can probably be shown. This leads to a good start for eradicating the air quality of the territory. We hope that the Government can come to consensus with all walks of life and legislate for idling vehicles. Let all of us work together to improve roadside air quality, maintain good health of citizens and our earth.



If you would also like to make an effort to save the earth, here is the opportunity. Join our club, join our activities and receive our Green information regularly.

~~Hong Kong traffic density is the highest in the world. Presently, Hong Kong has around 550 000 vehicles. While the total length of road is only 2009 km. On average there are 275 vehicles travelling on 1km of road.

~~For a car idling for 10 minutes a day, 100L more gasoline will be used in a year. Assume the price of gasoline is \$14/L, each year \$1400 will be wasted.



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