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Dependence on driving is making us fat and sick

When you combine the toxic effects of vehicle emissions with a lack of physical exercise, cars could be considered a major public health enemy. That's why the Leonia Environmental Commission is launching the *Walk Leonia* campaign this spring, to encourage more people to get out of their cars and get around town on foot.

"We're fortunate to live in a community where we can easily walk to many of the places we need to go in just a few minutes," observes Commission Chair Martha Lieblich. "And it counts toward our daily exercise, which we need to help keep off the pounds and stay healthier."

New Jersey is putting on the pounds

The obesity rate in New Jersey has increased more than 90 percent over the last 15 years, and among the culprits is a lack of physical exercise. More than three in five New Jersey adults are overweight or obese¹, and over 15 percent of the state's children and adolescents are considered obese.

Not coincidentally, more than one in three youngsters do not participate in regular physical activity. Numerous studies have shown a strong correlation between obesity and sedentary lifestyle.

"We know that in countries where people do more walking and cycling, the rate of obesity is much lower than in the US," says Leonia cardiologist Frank Livelli, who also serves on the Environmental Commission. "We also know that obesity is a risk factor for a whole host of serious health conditions, while increased physical activity reduces the risk of premature death, coronary heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer and diabetes."

Auto exhaust is hazardous to health

Other good reasons to drive less and walk more are the serious health consequences of vehicle exhaust, which contains fine particulates, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, benzene, formaldehyde, lead, ozone, and other toxic chemicals.

Leonia is in the "red zone" on the New Jersey map showing where diesel particulate concentrations are 100 to 1000 times the benchmark.² And Leonia's air pollution indexes for carbon monoxide and nitrogen dioxide are more than 50 percent worse than nationwide indexes.³

Together, all this air pollution from cars could be exacting a heavy toll on residents' health. Nationwide, particulates and other auto emissions result in 20,000 to 46,000 cases of chronic respiratory illness, such as asthma, and 40,000 premature deaths each year.⁴ In New Jersey, fine particle pollution alone may actually cause more premature deaths than homicides and car accidents combined.⁵ And breathing in fumes from heavy traffic can also triple the risk of heart attack for up to an hour.⁶

Children are even more susceptible to the harmful effects of auto exhaust because they breathe up to 50 percent more air per pound of body weight than adult.⁶ That may help to explain why asthma rates among children have increased 160 percent in 20 years, with urban asthma rates even higher.⁷

Vehicles emit greenhouse gases

Most scientists agree that greenhouse gases (GHG), such as carbon dioxide, contribute to climate change that could threaten human health and safety, disrupt the environment and jeopardize property, quality of life and the economy. The total GHG emissions caused by an organization, event, product or person can be called their “carbon footprint.” About one third of New Jersey’s “carbon footprint” comes from cars and other vehicles.

Walk, Leonia!

To promote the health of people and the planet, the Environmental Commission’s **Walk Leonia** campaign will kick off at Leonia Day on May 20. Residents can stop by the Commission’s information booth to pick up a special walking map of the borough that shows how fast and easy it can be to get around town on foot.

“We’re especially eager to have kids use our map to explore Leonia and jot down information about their walking excursions in the Trip Tracker printed inside the map,” says Paul Leibow, a member of the Commission. “A limited number of free gifts will be available for school-age children at the booth, so we hope they’ll stop by with their parents.”

The Leonia Environmental Commission, one of the first environmental commissions in New Jersey, is appointed by the Mayor to advise the town on conservation, open space preservation, water resources, solid waste management and other environmental matters. The Commission meets on the first Wednesday of each month at 7:30PM in the Committee Room of the Leonia Borough Hall, 312 Broad Avenue. The public is welcome to attend. For information call 201-592-7887, email mliebllich@leonianj.gov or visit the Environmental Commission page on the Borough’s web site at www.leonianj.gov.

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¹ “F as in fat: How obesity threatens America's future 2011, a report from the Trust for America's Health (TFAH) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

<http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2011/release.php?stateid=NJ>

² NJDEP “Air Toxics in New Jersey” <http://www.nj.gov/dep/airtoxics/Diesel05.htm>

³ Leonia, NJ Pollution Levels and Indexes: http://www.clrsearch.com/Leonia_Demographics/NJ/Pollution-Levels

⁴ SFDPH “Regional and Local Health Impacts of Driving” – April 2009:

http://www.sfphes.org/HIA_Tools/Driving_Health.pdf

⁵ NJ Department of Health and Human Services “Gasping for breath: Fine particle pollution from diesel emissions is toxic to your health”

⁶ “Car fumes raise heart attack risk for six-hour window” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-14978027>

⁷ Surveillance for Asthma – United States, 1960-1995, MMWR April 24, 1998/47(SS-1); 1-28