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Being The Change

A ban on drive-thru windows?!

There is a growing movement in Canadian cities to ban the drive thru window option at fast food restaurants, banks, coffee shops, beer stores, hair salons, and university parking lots. For instance, North Vancouver has been discussing a moratorium on any new drive-thru windows in their city, even though they only have a few to start with, city councilors do not want this service to proliferate, citing environmental concerns linked to vehicles idling for minutes at time.

The cities of Mississauga and Hamilton are considering similar bans and the city of Kitchener, a city notorious for drive-thru windows and poor air quality has recently heard the issue at council meetings. A vote is expected after a fast-food industry financed study is released. I am fully supportive for a ban on new drive-thru windows, but it is not a progressive idea, the city of Santa Cruz in California enacted that law in 1979.

The city of Kitchener's planning department has already denied or reversed decisions on drive-thru locations on the grounds that they were not conducive to pedestrian safety. Now the city is looking at the larger picture of public and environmental health.

Kitchener has the opportunity to not only implement a ban on new drive-thru services but also phase-out existing locations over several years. When combined with a program that will educate drivers about the negative environmental effects of idling (and the associated adverse health consequences), this wasteful use of the finite petroleum resource will reduce beyond the drive-thru lane. A more aware citizen would be molded and the city would become a cleaner and healthier place.

The main arguments against banning drive-thru services that I have read in the news and on message boards are that:

1. They are good for people with special limitations, such as the elderly who are too weak to get out of the car they are controlling and walk across a parking lot; cab drivers who apparently are not allowed out of their cars; parents with small children in the car who will eat with one hand, talk on the phone with the other and drive with their knees.
2. They increase safety for late-night eaters, who are comforted by being trapped in a drive-thru lane between a wall, two other cars and a curb.
3. Firing up a cooling engine is more harmful then letting your car idle for ten minutes.
4. People are use to them and taking them away would cause psychiatric issues plus they are responsible for only a small fraction of the over all emissions that it would not make a difference to the environment if we banned them.
5. Drive-thru services reduce pollution as people no longer have to spend time circling around the block looking for a parking spot.

These ideas are not adequate as these are not strong reasons to continue a wasteful and damaging practice; not relevant as people adapted to the drive-thru, they can adapt to a

life without them; and not truthful as university funded (as opposed to industry funded) studies have found that idling your car for more than 10 seconds creates more pollution than does turning it off and restarting it.

We have to start somewhere, and something as easy as turning your car off and entering a store is a simple start that could help raise the level of ecological-system awareness in our society. Of course, the issue of why we even need these unhealthy fast-food and drive-thru services instead of an appreciation of slowness and of real 'slow-food' could be argued here, but I have limited space.

A ban on drive-thru service windows would be a great compliment to the anti-idling by-laws that are also gaining momentum in Canada and the enforcement of such rules, in a drive-thru lane would be the next step in the battle. We can not have a by-law that restricts something and also allow the infrastructure for that activity to take place. A restriction on idling would, in my mind, automatically ban the drive-thru.

The only solution I can come up with to allowing drive-thru services and also have an anti-idling by-law would be to create a sort of conveyor belt, like they have at car washes, that could ferry turned off vehicles through the drive-thru lanes, and still allow people their vehicular addiction.

It is up to the citizenry and through them our governments to stand up and enact rules that harm no-one but will save our limited petrol resources for driving (instead of just burning them away while sitting around), clean up our dirty and unhealthy air and free people from their vehicles.