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Commentary:

Cleaner-air efforts are start down right road

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Like many causes, the fight to reduce the emission of gases scientists say contribute to global warming depends as much on the broadening of public awareness as the struggle to craft effective legislation in Washington. If people don't get the sense the problem is as serious as experts say, and believe there are steps they themselves can take to improve the situation, things are unlikely to change for the better. The quality of our air will continue to worsen.

In offering a \$25 or \$50 discount on vehicle sticker fee for cars that meet new emission standards, the cushy suburb of Wilmette isn't going to make much of a dent in the problem. That would be true even if there were more than two models available for purchase in the Midwest that qualify for the \$50 discount by meeting the Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Way Elite designation, which is based on a car's air pollution and greenhouse-gas emissions. Both of those models are Hondas. (Tailpipe emissions account for about 22 percent of CO₂ in the United States.)

But like those towns (including San Antonio and Salt Lake City) offering free parking within city limits for hybrids or other "green" cars and dozens of other municipalities pledging to meet Kyoto protocol goals for reducing carbon-dioxide pollution, Wilmette is doing its best to be part of the solution. "It's getting discussion going," said a village board member. "It's raising awareness, giving kudos to people who are doing the right things, and really putting the word out there that there isn't this huge choice you have to make between being environmental or not."

At a time when the EPA is being attacked from within as well as from without for not imposing stringent enough reductions in the acceptable amount of fine particles in the air -- its own science advisory board, among other health bodies, said it should have made both daily and annual standards tougher, not just the former -- it is left to state and local governments to act.

The good news is they are doing just that: California recently became the first state to cap greenhouse gas emissions, led by a governor determined to convey the notion that this isn't a partisan or ideological issue. Having gotten two major utilities to reduce their emissions of mercury and other pollutants, Gov. Blagojevich has ordered state-government cars and buildings to cut pollutants and improve energy efficiency. This may well prove to be an election-year gesture, but even if it doesn't result in Illinois matching California, it has the state serving as an example of how to do things in a more environmentally friendly manner. Cleaner air isn't an impossible dream.

This represents the consensus of the Sun-Times News group of 100 newspapers in metro Chicago

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