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Tackle smoky exhausts

WELLINGTON Regional Council needs to stop making excuses for not mounting an Auckland-style 0800 campaign against belching vehicle exhausts, and just get on with it. Land transport committee chairman Terry **McDavitt's** comment that the council has not run such a campaign because nobody has called for one is inane.

Auckland's experience is worth emphasising till Mr **McDavitt** and his colleagues take note. Auckland Regional Council created an 0800 SMOKEY phone line just over a year ago and urged motorists to do in the drivers of vehicles that belched evil fumes. Some 57,090 people, trapped in clouds of smoke behind offending vehicles, have responded, fingering 27,000 polluters. This was an education effort, not a revenue-raising exercise, and was an empowerment device, enabling angry motorists (and pedestrians) to do something in response to polluters. The council sent the owners of the errant vehicles information packs with an invitation to a free exhaust check. Some garages were so inundated with work they had to take on extra staff.

The result was that 60 per cent of motorists contacted had their cars tuned, a quite phenomenal result. What began as a six-week campaign eventually ran for 10 months. Up to 1200 calls a day were made to the hotline at the campaign's peak. Before-and-after surveys showed that the number of Aucklanders who considered air quality a serious problem rose from 10 per cent to 47 per cent.

A similar campaign in Wellington is bound to have similar results. There are important health and safety **issues at stake**. Traffic fumes do not just smell bad. They aggravate medical problems in some people and they can kill.

A National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research study estimates that as many as 399 New Zealanders over the age of 30 die prematurely each year from **long-term** exposure to microscopic **particles from** vehicle emissions. That is more than the 388 people who are said to **die each year from** secondhand tobacco smoke and only 56 fewer than last year's road toll. Broken down into regions, the Niwa study **estimated 253** of the premature deaths were in the Auckland region, but the next worse, with **56** deaths, was Wellington.

Harmful exhaust pollution is being **reduced** by other means, as well. Lead has long been abolished and an Auckland Regional Authority campaign has brought about reduced sulphur levels in diesel. That is particularly important because many of the hulking 4WD monsters so popular in the leafier suburbs **are fuelled by** diesel. New restrictions on the importation of pre-1996 vehicles will mean better exhaust **systems** and, hopefully, less smoke. Since September, police have had the power to fine motorists \$150 if their vehicles emit a stream of visible smoke for 10 seconds or more, but it appears only **100-odd** tickets have been issued. Police understandably have more pressing matters to attend to, making it all the more important for the regional council to act and to enable the motoring public to assist in policing for this noxious offence.