Crowd Packs County Council hearing, demands action for better air

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*Story and photo by Paul Christiansen*

LOGAN—Dozens of concerned Cache Valley residents—many bearing protest signs—converged on the Historic County Courthouse Tuesday evening for a public hearing and opportunity to voice outrage over polluted winter air. The throng filled the Cache County Council chambers to capacity, spilling into the foyer, and most in attendance showed support for an ordinance the council has yet to vote on.

If passed, the ordinance will mandate vehicle emissions testing in an attempt to reduce the amount of harmful particulates released into valley air.

“We’ve been soliciting public input,” said Council Chairman Val Potter, beginning the meeting. “This is another opportunity and probably the final opportunity—as a council—we’ll have to hear public input on this before a final decision is made regarding this ordinance.”

Deborah Green, a registered nurse for Intermountain Healthcare and a Cache Valley resident since June 2008, was the first to address the council. Green said she has developed asthmatic health complications since moving to the valley and often has to rely on an inhaler to help stabilize her breathing.

“Since moving up here, my first winter I noticed I was having a little bit of struggle breathing,” Green said. “My second winter I had to start using a rescue inhaler and I had never used one before in my life.”

As a health care professional, Green said she frequently attends to patients who experience respiratory problems.

“They come in for something else even but they have issues with their breathing because of the air quality,” she said. “I also work with a lot of people who have asthma that has gotten a lot worse over the last few years. Our air quality on the red days is like smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.”

Utah State University Professor Jean Lown said the entire country is taking notice of Cache Valley’s air problem as it continually gets worse with each passing winter.

“The thing I’d like to emphasize today is that we’re making the news,” Lown said. “The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times—everyone knows that we are becoming the Beijing of the United States.”

Lown said the bad air is detrimental to the local economy. She also made mention of studies conducted by Dr. C. Arden Pope, an economist at Brigham Young University who is internationally known for his research of the effects particulate air pollution has on mortality and health.

“Pope and his research have shown that for every dollar you spend on cleaning up the air you get $10 benefit,” Lown said. “Or another way of looking at it: there’s $10 in health care costs. Anyone who talks about the costs of the emissions testing, please keep in mind this ten-to-one benefit of cleaning up the air.”

Cache Valley resident Megan Schwender took a few moments at the podium, asking those concerned individuals in attendance who support emissions testing to raise their hands and make themselves known to the council.

Nearly everyone gathered did so.

“You have our support for emissions testing,” Schwender said. “Look around because we’re your constituents. And there’s a lot of people out there in the lobby that you can’t see.”

Potter recognized the call to action made by those distressed civilians representing the valley.

“I think we all understand that vehicle emissions is part of the problem but it’s not all of the problem,” Potter said, turning to his fellow council members. “This is going to
help, but it’s not going to solve the problem. This vehicle emissions testing is a start but it’s not the solution.”

Councilman Craig Petersen said the council could not pass the ordinance Tuesday night because “it simply wouldn’t comply with state code” and would have to be brought up again for another vote. Petersen indicated he believed the council would likely pass the ordinance at its next meeting.

Mark Blaiser, director of the Bear River Watershed Council and a father-to-be, said he began thinking about things in a different way after his wife became pregnant.

“I think as a society, the first thing we should do and our No. 1 priority should be to protect our children,” Blaiser said. “I guess as a citizen, I’d really like to start seeing some action and some movement forward on policies and regulations that can clean up our air for our children’s sake. Not for my sake, not for your sake, but for our kids’ sake.”

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