

## Travis County commissioners completing ozone plan

**Proposal would limit use of some small-engine machines and fueling hours and let some employees work from home.**

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Travis County commissioners on Tuesday reached the final stages of writing an ozone protection program they hope will spread to other Central Texas communities that don't have similar plans.

The proposal, aimed at county employees during work hours, includes limiting use of small-engine machines, restricting hours during which county vehicles can be fueled, and allowing some employees to work from home on "ozone watch" days.

Ozone is a pollutant created by petroleum-based emissions that intensifies breathing problems, especially in hot weather. It can affect children and elderly people as well as healthy people who spend a lot of time outdoors.

"Reducing ozone is a health benefit to us all," said Adele Noel, Travis County air quality project manager

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's human health standard for ozone is 75 parts per billion, Noel said. Austin's high ozone level hovers, year to year, between 80 and 84 parts per billion. If an urban area fails to prove to the EPA that they are trying to cut emissions, they face loss of federal highway money, and businesses in the area could face strict permitting procedures, she said.

An ozone watch begins when the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality notifies communities that weather conditions are right for high ozone production.

Under the county's plan, all five of the county's fueling stations would be closed from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. on watch days to eliminate emissions when vehicles are refueled.

Public safety vehicles such as sheriff's department patrol cars would be allowed to be refueled until 7:30 a.m. Deputies could use county credit cards to refuel a car in emergencies.

Gasoline and diesel-powered equipment used to mow or otherwise maintain county property would be prohibited on ozone watch days.

Officials also are planning a series of seminars in late March and early April to instruct the county's 4,700 workers on how to carpool, use public transit, cycle or walk to work.

Some employees would work from home on their personal computers as long as the computers were secure and employees turned in a work plan the day before to ensure a full day's work is done, Noel said.

During initial stages of the plan, the staff suggested encouraging alternatives to single-occupant vehicle travel for county employees by levying a \$10 surcharge to park in a downtown county parking lot unless two or more workers were in the car. That idea was eliminated after County Judge Sam Biscoe and County Auditor Susan Spataro expressed doubts about its fairness.

Commissioners intend to have a final plan in place by April 1 after getting input from the county's legal department and its employee parking advisory committee. Noel said she hopes the county's efforts will prompt people across Central Texas to adopt greener habits.

Fred Blood, head of the City of Austin's air quality program, said Austin has had refueling limits on ozone watch days for several years.

"What we plan to do is re-emphasize and refocus on policies we started several years ago," Blood said, referring to the approximately 12,000 city employees. "At one time, we had about 600 employees working from home, but I don't know what that number is today. We are going to start tracking things like that again."

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