Traffic takes its toll in Lafayette

Air pollution still a problem in the Hub City.

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LAFAYETTE — Two thirds of all hazardous air pollutants in Lafayette Parish, including cancer-causing agents, come from automobiles. That's even higher than the national average of 60 percent, according to a study released by the Environmental Defense Fund, an environmental advocacy group.

The study uses 1990 statistics gathered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Environmental Defense Fund calculated additional cancer risks with that data, which shows that automobiles are responsible for 68 percent of HAPs in Lafayette.

Those numbers, say experts, show that traffic affects Lafayette's air more than most would think.

"The numbers show that cars, trucks and small businesses tend to be responsible for much more of the air's toxicity than is generally recognized," said Environmental Defense Fund attorney David Roe.

Mike Hollier, planning manager for Lafayette's department of Planning, Zoning and Codes, says that's true.

"I think it's a bigger problem than the average person in Lafayette thinks. I mean, who would think we have a problem?" said Hollier.

For an 18-month period ending in mid-1995, major road projects in Lafayette Parish were put on hold by the Federal Transportation Administration, until the parish's air quality was brought within national standards.

According to air samples taken throughout the parish, concentrations of carbon monoxide, lead and other toxins exceeded national standards mandated by the EPA. Since then, those restrictions have been lifted and the parish has fared well for the last four years.

While Hollier says Lafayette's air quality has improved, it's still a problem. But no one knows why.

"That's a good question, but I can't find anyone who can answer it," said Hollier.

Since then, major road projects like the Ambassador Caffery Parkway South extension, the Camellia Boulevard Bridge and extension are moving along more quickly than ever. And Lafayette's Public Works Department is pushing projects through at a heretofore unheard of rate, officials said.

Answer is in the trees

Harold Schoeffler, president of the local chapter of the Sierra Club, said that while building roads will improve the parish's air quality, maintaining what Lafayette already has in place is just as important.

"One mature tree will clean enough air to (offset pollution) from 50 automobiles," Schoeffler said. That's a statistic rarely heard during local government meetings, he said.

"I don't think it's even considered," said Schoeffler, of the role that trees play in keeping the air clean.

"If there were some project that would come to our community that would require the demolition of 5,000 trees and it produces five jobs, I think we would welcome it with open arms," he said.

While a bottom-line mentality has spelled doom for Lafayette's oaks, Schoeffler said, there is hope.

Schoeffler said he is still hopeful that the city-parish council adopts a tree ordinance.

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that would require businesses and homeowners to get a permit before cutting.

“it would help a great deal,” he said.

Red Stick Roulette

In Baton Rouge, officials are hopeful that vapor recovery devices, which prevent toxic emissions from escaping while customers put gas in their vehicles, will help curb the city’s pollution problems.

Such devices were installed throughout the area, when the city was identified as one of the state’s most polluted.

Still, little has been done to control automobile emissions.

Currently, Louisiana has no emissions inspection for automobiles, so there’s no mechanism in place to make sure vehicles are operating at peak efficiency.

A bill before the Legislature this year could change that.

It would require automobile owners to have their vehicles inspected annually and tested for emissions.

“We hope very much it gets passed,” Hannah said.

Hannah says if emissions inspections were put in place, air pollution caused by vehicles in Baton Rouge, the state’s worst area for automobile-related pollution, would decrease 70 percent.