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Paved shoulders can improve air quality: report

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New dust suppression methods on roadways and at construction sites in the Oakville-Clarkson area should be explored, a report to Ontario's environment ministry recommends.

"Municipalities should pave the shoulders of main roads within the air-shed to prevent dust entrainment and tracking of materials into the roadway," recommends David Balsillie in his final report on the air quality in the Southwest Greater Toronto Area Oakville-Clarkson Airshed. "Royal Windsor Drive, from Winston Churchill Boulevard to Ford Drive, is an example of such a roadway."

The Southwest Greater Toronto Area Air Quality Task Force was established in September 2009 to help make recommendations to improve air quality and manage air pollution impacts in the Oakville-Clarkson Airshed (OCA). The task force's final report resulted in more than 30 recommendations which vary from strategies to the assignment of roles and responsibilities.

The airshed's boundaries are Chartwell Road on the west, Mississauga Road on the east, Dundas Street East and West on the north and Lake Ontario on the south. The report's recommendations are specific to this area.

"This is a vision for the long-term sustainable management of the OCA. Some of the initiatives proposed in this Action Plan will provide immediate changes which should lead to positive impacts on air quality," concluded Balsillie. "Other improvements will be realized only with the passage of time because they will require planning, investment, performance trials, and the involvement of numerous partners."

Some of the report's recommendations concerned construction sites and roadbuilding practices in the area. The report's shoulder-paving recommendation would result in additional work for roadbuilders and could help reduce pollution and vehicle use, said Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario.

"You end up minimizing the dust effect, but if a municipality planned it right, you could build bike lanes which could reduce vehicle traffic," Manahan said.

The report also recommended that Ontario's transportation ministry, municipalities, industries and construction companies should "adopt best management practices" to develop dedicated street-sweeping programs for removing road dust materials "so that the re-entrainment of particles by car and truck traffic is lessened."

Balsillie also noted that industrial and construction sites should lower "fugitive dust emissions" through better use of dust suppressants or the paving of parking lots and loading areas.

Karen Renkema, government relations director at the Ontario Road Builders' Association (ORBA), explained that many ORBA member companies already work hard to reduce fugitive dust emissions.

Also, general requirements for dust suppression in roadbuilding contracts are commonplace.

Road building companies consider dust suppression important for both their workers and their surrounding community, she said.

“We are always interested in ensuring that the best for the environment is being done,” Renkema said.

As it concerns street sweeping programs, there are already requirements in maintenance contracts aimed to ensure street sweeping is part of a contract.

“We cannot simply just start sweeping a municipal street without a municipality asking us to,” Renkema added.