



Air Quality Briefing Note

Date: March 2012
Agency: Vic Steblin
Subject: Residential approaches to improving air quality in downtown Prince George

Air quality is a concern in any city but especially in Prince George, which has one of the highest levels of particulate matter in the province. Slow wind speeds and temperature inversions effectively trap airborne particulates in the downtown “bowl” or depression. Particulates and GHG emissions come primarily from industry, road dust, car use, and the heating and cooling of buildings.

The City of Prince George Clean Air Bylaw limits the conditions for using wood stoves to heat homes and for maintaining recreational fires. During an air quality advisory, these uses are further limited if not banned due to the negative effect wood burning has on air quality.

Downtown Prince George resident Vic Steblin has been researching wood burning and its effect on air quality for much of the last five years. What he has read about the health effects and climate effects of burning wood has him convinced that a key part of the solution to Prince George air quality is for residents to stop burning wood—stop burning it to heat their homes, and stop burning wood in backyard burners. In non-rural areas, residents live close enough to each other that one person’s wood fire, even if it’s just for marshmallows, becomes someone else’s next breath. Whether cigarette smoke or wood smoke, such secondhand smoke is a documented health hazard.

The attitudes and actions of homeowners play a significant role in neighbourhood air quality. Steblin’s own activities to improve air quality are things that any resident can do:

1. Remove wood stoves and convert to natural gas. As a fuel, natural gas is far more efficient for heating homes and has far less negative impact on air quality.
2. Stop backyard burning. Burners can become wishing wells, and Steblin’s did, or some other creative feature of the yard and garden.
3. Lower the thermostat. Putting on sweaters and long johns in cold weather, even indoors, is common sense to reduce fuel consumption of any type and limit emissions (GHG and particulates). Public buildings could lower their thermostats if residents got into the habit of dressing appropriate to the season.

4. Get involved and talk to others. Steblin submits letters to websites and newspapers and also shares them with other concerned people he meets who are advocating in other communities for cleaner air. Other opportunities exist to join a citizen group, bring ideas to public agencies like health authorities or city hall, or simply talk to your neighbours.

5. Respect your neighbours. Burning wood in the yard or in a wood stove produces smoke that others will end up breathing. Living in non-rural areas means sharing the air.

Residents have the most control over their own domains, making the home a great place to start paying attention to air quality.