

Revisiting Charity & Home Car Washing

The problem of local organizations polluting our local waterways is still with us while washing vehicles at home in driveways remains a major concern. Although progress has been made in both areas through a significant amount of publicity, we still have a long way to go to make people, local communities and organizations aware of the damage they unknowingly are causing.

The following information may be useful to you in helping those in your local community become aware of the problem and how to fix it.

What is the problem with washing vehicles in driveways or parking lots? There are two major concerns:

1. Excessive water usage.
2. Pollution of local waterways.

A standard 5/8" garden hose running at 50 pounds per square inch uses 10 gallons of water per minute (this is without the use of a nozzle that stops the continuous flow of water). The average person who takes extreme care not to waste water, takes 5-6 minutes to wash and rinse their car for a total consumption of 50-60 gallons. For individuals who allow the water to run while they clean, this number can jump to a staggering 150-200 gallons.

Washing your car at a self-serve car wash uses a total of 12 to 14 gallons for the average amount of dirt (a very dirty car would require more). Professional car washing uses a total of 11 gallons (this number is for the average compact car; SUVs and trucks combine to bring the average of all vehicles to 20 gallons).

How do our local waterways become polluted because of washing vehicles in driveways and parking lots?

The wastewater from car washing contains pollutants ranging from oil, grease, and suspended solids to detergents. Detergents, such as the carwash or liquid soap, can seriously affect the water quality of local waterways. Some of the pollutants they contain are: phosphates, sodium, potassium, boron salts, enzymes, cellulose ethers, fluorescers, silicates and sulphates with phosphates being the biggest offender. Even biodegradable soaps are toxic to fish.

Every car that is washed discharges a fine toxic mix. Depending on what is used to wash the vehicle (let's say water alone in the minimum), driveway car wash discharge consists of oils, grease, elements from brake linings, rust trace amounts of benzene and possibly chromium, and a few other goodies. Adding soap to the mix possibly introduces the pollutants listed above. Imagine what happens when you add spray-off tire cleaner!

Wastewater runs down driveways, out of parking lots into our storm drains, and proceeds **untreated** directly into our waterways. Wastewater needs to be diverted into the sewer system so it is treated before going into our waterways.

Now that we are aware of the problem, what can we do about it? Here are some suggestions:

- Even though your neighbors might think you're strange, wash your car, RV or boat on your lawn or gravel area. Grass helps by providing a filter for the soapy water. Grass and other plants absorb the chemicals and other contaminants, thereby reducing the amount of pollutants that end up in the storm drain. The root system of plants can tolerate much more than can aquatic insects and fish.
- When holding a charity car washing event in the parking lot of a local business, use sandbags to make sure the wastewater doesn't flow down the driveway and into the storm drain. Divert the wastewater toward drains going into the sewer system.
- **Always** use flow control devices on hoses, such as a hand spray nozzle with an on and off trigger. This greatly reduces the amount of water used which helps save this precious resource while reducing the amount of wastewater.
- Before holding your charity car washing event, contact your local city to find out what requirements they have for charity car washing events that you must meet.
- Always have at least one adult (21 years of older) for supervisory purposes for every 6 to 8 teenager volunteers.

ALTERNATIVES TO HOLDING CHARITY CAR-WASHING EVENTS

Here are a few suggestions for alternative methods local organizations can use to raise money instead of holding charity car washing events in driveways or parking lots:

- Contact local professional car washes and ask if they have a program available that provides tickets for your group to sell. When these tickets are used at the car wash, your local group receives a pre-determined amount per ticket sold and used.
- Local professional car washes also can be asked to donate a part of the day's proceeds to your group. Their business and public image possibly increase through your promotion of the event in the community.
- Hold a flea market instead. Ask neighbors and local businesses if they have any items they can donate.
- Contact your local Chamber of Commerce to see if they will assist you in locating local businesses that will pay to have flyers distributed.

The best way to ensure that waste water from washing cars goes into sewers rather than storm drains is to use either a full-serve or self-serve professional car wash facility. They are already set up to process the waste water properly and use fewer gallons of water per vehicle washed.

Sources:

Green-CT.org, <http://greenct.org/carwash.htm>

Kokias Reserach Group, www.kolias.com

Fairfax County, Virginia, www.fairfaxcounty.gov/nvswcd/newsletter/carwashing.thm

City of Fremont, CA, www.ci-fremont.ca.us/Environment/StormWaterProgram/Carwashing.htm

City of Kirkland, WA, www.ci.kirkland.wa.us/department/surface/carwash.htm

City of Redmond, WA, www.ci.redmond.wa.us/insidecityhall/publicworks/environment/education2.asp