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Most fear air quality, poll says

Majority of Torontonians believe air pollution endangering their health, survey indicates

BY WALLACE IMMEN

A majority of people living in Toronto believe the city's lousy air is hurting their health, according to the results of a survey released yesterday.

The poll by Oracle Research found 75 per cent of people think air pollution is affecting their health now and 82 per cent believe it will endanger their health in the future.

Toronto had a record 20 smog alerts last year and the Toronto Board of Health estimates smog results in as many as 1,000 premature deaths each year.

"People are aware Toronto has a major public-health problem and they want action", said City Councillor Jack Layton, who announced the results.

As president of The Toronto Atmospheric Fund, he has looked at polling done about pollution in other cities and he said the public concern in Toronto is the highest in Canada.

"But the level of concern doesn't seem to be reflected in the priorities of city hall, the province or Ottawa", Mr. Layton said.

Nearly half of those polled, 46 per cent, said they thought the city is doing a poor job in controlling air pollution. The federal government received a 48-per-cent negative rating for its pollution efforts and the province's pollution record was rated poor by 55 per cent of those polled.

The poll, commissioned by the Toronto Atmospheric Fund, asked the opinions of 1,000 people selected at random. It is considered accurate to within 3.1 per cent.

Mr. Layton said city council should take the results to heart when it opens debate this week on priorities for the city budget. He said the city is currently spending about 77 cents per capita on promoting clean air, while Vancouver is budgeting $1.29 and Ottawa is spending $1.86 per head.

But Toronto is under pressure to curb expenditures to keep property-tax rates under control. Several actions that could help reduce air pollution are fighting for scarce funds in this year's budget, Mr. Layton said.

Among them are programs to expand the city's network of bike lanes, an expanded composting and waste-management program, and the purchase of a fleet of more-energy-efficient buses.

The bus purchase is contingent on a commitment of funds from the federal government, but so far there has been no word from Ottawa, Mr. Layton said.

Bike lanes have proved effective at shifting people out of cars to run errands or commute to work, he said. Every car trip saved is a reduction in exhaust pollution.

Another major way to reduce emissions is to retrofit buildings with more-energy-efficient windows and insulation. The Atmospheric Fund, a trust established by the city, is already providing loans to schools to do immediate refits and to use the money saved on heating and cooling bills to pay back the loans.

Mr. Layton said he believes a similar program for homeowners could result in a substantial reduction in energy use and pollution emissions over the course of a year.