

Auto body fumes a frequent complaint in San Diego



In San Diego's Lincoln Park neighborhood, a report came in – fumes from spray paint and thinner so thick the caller had problems breathing and was going to pass out.

In Spring Valley, a resident said an auto body shop was painting in a small room with no exhaust filters. Neighborhood children were getting sick.

Just outside Lemon Grove, Eric Drayner said he raised objections for years about a shop on the other side of the wall in his backyard. The problem is not going away.

“We gave up complaining,” Drayner said. “It doesn't help. I'm getting close to retirement. When I retire I'm leaving.” The civil engineer said the value of his property was diminished, and that his neighbors, aggravated and exhausted, also gave up and moved out.

From Oceanside to National City, Escondido to Chula Vista, complaints about fumes emanating from car painting operations are among the most frequent reported to air authorities. An analysis of records by *inewssource* shows more than 10 percent of air complaints in San Diego County cite auto and truck painting, with 224 of some 2,100 complaints made between January 2013 and April 2016.

The [Environmental Health Coalition](#), one of nation's oldest groups devoted to urban environmental health, has long worked in National City. Research Director Joy Williams said the issue is “a big part of what we have heard from residents.”

Some of the shops receiving complaints are well-established. Others are makeshift spray booths.

The county [Air Pollution Control District](#) has primary jurisdiction over air quality issues in the region. The district's Robert Kard refused requests for an interview. In an email he said inspectors routinely canvas

neighborhoods for unpermitted businesses of any kind and also respond to complaints in a timely manner. Any time they visit an auto paint shop, Kard wrote, they look at the coatings to make sure only modern, waterborne products are used.

Several people interviewed spoke of positive change in the industry as it has moved away from solvent-based paints.

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Changes are also a result of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rules that went into effect in 2010 and 2011 because “these shops can emit a type of pollution called air toxics or hazardous air pollutants,” said Alison Davis, a senior adviser for public affairs in the agency’s air office. The rules defined a shop as anyone taking money for painting cars or painting more than two vehicles a year. It required enclosed spray booths and controls on how workers clean their tools to reduce the release of solvents.

But chemicals that people ought not be exposed to are still used in auto body work. Common solvents are xylene, acetone, alcohol, and sometimes NMP, said Charles Corcoran, supervisory environmental scientist at the state Department of Toxic Substances Control. NMP, or N-methyl-pyrrolidone, is considered a reproductive hazard by the California Department of Public Health, meaning it may be dangerous for babies in utero. Acetone can cause dizziness and irritate the nose, throat, lungs and eyes. Both xylene and NMP have limits on their use in San Diego County, the district wrote.

The district also exempts some small shops from the federal requirement for an enclosed spray booth, it said in an email. On a case-by-case basis it decides whether exhaust air must be filtered. Environmental Protection Agency [rules require](#) spray booths to have filtration systems that are 98 percent efficient. The district’s practice may be illegal.

“A local government or jurisdiction is not allowed to make exemptions for auto body shops,” Enesta Jones of the EPA wrote. “The federal rule reflects the minimum acceptable standards for auto body shops in the United States.”

No address in San Diego County received more vehicle painting complaints in the last three years than the one behind Drayner’s home on Broadway in Lemon Grove, with more than 60.

“One, two times someone has come out here,” he said of the air authorities. “‘Gee, we don’t smell anything now. We’ll take some samples.’ Well, of course not, you came out here the next day. They’re not real responsive.”

The Air Pollution Control District provided records showing it has issued 10 violations at the address since 2013, carrying fines totaling \$2,650. Those fines were all issued to Lemon Grove Truck Body & Equipment,

one of several body shop businesses operating at 8373 Broadway. Air authorities say two of the violations are recent, from 2016, so fines haven't been assessed yet.

One of the owners of Lemon Grove Truck Body, Omar Zamora, said he believes some of the complaints are wrongly attributed to his businesses.

"We try to keep the noise and smells down, but there's only so much we can do," he said, noting apartments just a few feet away.

David McClune, executive director of the California Autobody Association, said most businesses try to prevent or remedy any disturbance to neighbors. He urged anyone who suspects an unlicensed operation to contact the California [Bureau of Automotive Repair](#). The bureau also dispatches inspectors to consumers' homes or workplaces when a repair may have been done incorrectly.

Lemon Grove Truck Body is the subject of dozens of complaints about fumes, but Omar Zamora, an owners, says some are erroneous, and rightfully should name other body shops at the address. "There's like six shops here," he said.

David Winkowski, a program supervisor in the San Diego office, said the complaint may be that someone is painting out in the open in a residential neighborhood. "I will send a rep out to let them know the area is not zoned for auto body repairs and they need to take it out of there," he said.

Maria and Thomas Hughes in Chula Vista say that is the situation they have endured for years – a neighbor sanding and painting multiple vehicles on the front patio. Their street is residential. Thomas Hughes said at one time nine Volkswagens were in the front yard. "Now they've got a tow truck over there."

"We got old working so that we could rest a little at home," Maria Hughes said in Spanish. "But we can't even go outside, so what good is it?" She said various authorities including the city of Chula Vista have observed the activity but done nothing.

The owner of the property on Emerson Street, Eva Sanchez, denied that family members do body work on other people's cars for pay.

"There is no business here," Sanchez said, identifying four of seven cars as belonging to relatives. Her son, her son-in-law and her brother-in-law, she said, simply "like to work on cars."

Where to call

- The California Autobody Association urges anyone who suspects an illegal auto paint operation to call the [California Bureau of Automotive Repair](#): (866) 799-3811.
- The San Diego Air Pollution Control District investigates air quality complaints. Submit them by phone (858) 586-2650 or email a completed [Air Quality Complaint Form](#).

Paint complaints

Chula Vista: “Business is painting cars with visible paint overspray that is also causing odors. Happens 7 days a week” until 8 p.m. – November 2015

City Heights: “Complains of ‘painting fumes’ and ‘smell that’s just killing us’ from a nearby auto repair shop.” – February 2015

Southeastern San Diego: “Complainant can see paint coming from the business during business hours. The paint coats nearby homes, cars and businesses. The complainant can also see paint coming from a vent in the shop into the air.” – January 2016

Vista: “They are constantly grinding and painting car parts, told them to stop, but they continue. Seems they’re running a body shop in a residential neighborhood.” – February 2016

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