

For Immediate Release
August 7, 2026

Contact: Jake Ricker
jake@goffpublic.com
(763) 443-1987

From one garage to 1,000 repairs: Project CAR hits milestone

Achievement reflects nine years of growth, eliminating 55 tons of ozone-forming emissions while supporting reliable transportation for Minnesota communities



Pictured from the left: Frank Kolasch from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, program co-founder, Mike Harley from Environmental Initiative, organization leading Project CAR, Anne Lee from Flint Hills Resources, program co-founder, Cathy Heying, founder and executive director of The Lift Garage, and Marge Sutcliffe, development specialist at The Lift Garage

MINNEAPOLIS – This summer, Project Clean Air Repair (CAR) completed its 1,000th free emissions system repair for income-qualified Minnesotans. This marks a milestone for a program that has expanded from one Twin Cities garage to a network stretching into Greater Minnesota to help improve air quality while keeping reliable transportation within reach for many

lower-income families. Led by Minneapolis-based nonprofit Environmental Initiative and supported by a collection of partners, Project CAR celebrated the achievement and continued growth of the program on August 6 with an event commemorating its landmark 1,000th repair.

"It's been wonderful to see Project CAR evolve from a modest pilot project into a strong, sustainable program with financial support from our founding partners, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and Flint Hills Resources, and the tireless work of our partner garages," said Mike Harley, executive director at Environmental Initiative. "Together, we have updated pollution control equipment on more than 1,000 of the highest polluting cars on the road while reducing barriers to reliable transportation. We're looking forward to our next 1,000 repairs and reaching 100 tons of emissions reduced through the program."

Launched in 2017, Project CAR is the first and only program of its kind in Minnesota. To date, it has contributed to reducing the amount of nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds emitted into the air by more than 55 tons by performing more than \$1 million in repairs at no cost to vehicle owners.

"Project CAR builds on the success of more than two decades of collaboration — led and inspired by Environment Initiative — to find creative and effective ways to protect and continually improve Minnesota's air quality," said Heather Rein, community affairs director for Flint Hills. "We are proud to be among the many business, nonprofit and government partners that have contributed to this important work that's delivering meaningful and measurable results."

Through its partnerships with local auto repair shops, Project CAR identifies vehicles that have broken or outdated emissions and exhaust systems — even if that's not the reason they were brought in for repairs — and fixes these systems for free for income-eligible owners. In most cases, these cars are older, higher polluting cars.

According to the MPCA, roughly 25% of passenger vehicles are responsible for 90% of automotive air pollution, which is the driving idea behind Project CAR. These vehicles continue to run and are invaluable to their owners but deteriorating emissions control systems mean they're emitting avoidable pollution. Fairly simple repairs enable them to produce fewer pollutants that contribute to ground-level ozone, but for many of those served through Project CAR, these repairs can feel financially out of reach. This is where Project CAR steps in to fill the gap between the cost of making repairs that are necessary and repairs that also improve environmental performance and fuel economy while reducing noise.

To mark Project CAR's 1,000th free repair, the program returned to the garage where it all began, The Lift Garage in Minneapolis, for an event that brought together staff and funders who have made the program successful. The Lift remains an active partner for Project CAR, repairing catalytic converters, oxygen sensors, EGR valves and other important emissions and exhaust components for neighbors with qualifying older vehicles.

"It's so rewarding to see how happy our customers are when they learn their exhaust system repairs qualify for Project CAR funding, meaning their money can go toward other essentials, like food, housing or any of the other expenses we all have in our lives," said Yohanis Shitta, director of operations and programs at The Lift Garage. "Project CAR creates opportunities for people to drive safer, cleaner and more reliable vehicles, which benefits them, the other people on the road and our environment."

In recent years, Project CAR has expanded beyond the Twin Cities and now includes partner garages in Alexandria, Duluth, Fergus Falls and Grand Rapids, extending the program's outreach, capacity and services into Greater Minnesota.

"An important part of our business model includes building strong connections with our local communities, which deserve and appreciate a business that continually prioritizes supporting its neighbors," said Steve Knodt, marketing director at Victory Tire and Auto, which operates Project CAR partner garages in Duluth and Grand Rapids. "Project CAR allows us to give back and support the community in the best way we know how, by skillfully repairing vehicles so they run smoother, cleaner and longer than they otherwise would."

Nine years after one garage took a chance on a new idea, Project CAR is proving what sustained community partnerships can accomplish. Funding partners have played a key role in the program's success, and additional support can help further scale the program to serve more drivers and accelerate the benefits to Minnesota's air quality. Any individual or organization interested in supporting Project CAR can reach out to [Sacha Seymour-Anderson](#) at Environmental Initiative to explore partnership opportunities.

About Flint Hills Resources

The [Flint Hills Resources](#) Pine Bend refinery produces transportation fuels used throughout the Midwest, including most of Minnesota's gasoline, diesel fuel, jet fuel, as well as other products people rely on such as propane and asphalt. Located 17 miles southeast of Minneapolis, Pine Bend has a refining capacity of 375,000 barrels per day and is among the most efficient oil refineries in the country. Flint Hills Resources directly and indirectly supports more than 4,400 Minnesota jobs and has invested more than \$5.4 billion in upgrades and improvements to its Minnesota facilities since 2002. With more than 1,000 full-time employees, the Flint Hills Resources Pine Bend refinery is one of the largest employers in Dakota County. More information about the Pine Bend refinery is available at [PineBendRefinery.com](#).

About Environmental Initiative

[Environmental Initiative](#) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization based in Minneapolis that catalyzes collaboration across perspectives, power and systems for social equity and environmental health. They have convened Clean Air Minnesota (CAM) for 23 years, a cross-sector group of air quality leaders developing and implementing strategies to improve air quality in Minnesota's most impacted communities. For more information about Project CAR, CAM and the rest of Environmental Initiative's clean air work, visit [environmental-initiative.org](#).

###