

South Miami moves to ban gas-powered leaf blowers



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Aurelio Chum, 22, of the Orchid Man Landscape company, blows grass cuttings with a leaf blower on Ponce de Leon Avenue in Coral Gables on October 11, 2010. The Gables dropped plans to ban leaf blowers shortly thereafter, but now South Miami is proposing the idea.

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South Miami landscapers may soon find a favored (and reviled) yard tool — the leaf blower — gone with the wind.

City commissioners on Tuesday will consider final approval of changes to the noise ordinance to ban the use of gas-powered leaf blowers within 50 feet of any residence or commercial outdoor dining area.

The changes would restrict when noisy landscaping equipment (such as lawn mowers, edgers, weed trimmers, electric leaf blowers, chain saws, chippers, stump grinders, pressure washers, and compressors) could be used. The city also would ban the use of lawn-maintenance equipment “in a way that causes objectionable dust or other particulate matter to blow or drift in or through another residential property,” and establishes acceptable decibel limits.

The amendment would prohibit commercial landscaping companies from using noise-producing lawn maintenance equipment within 75 feet of an occupied home on weekends, and between 6 p.m. and 8 a.m. on weekdays. Residents face less stringent restrictions: non-commercial operation is allowed after 8 a.m. — after 9 a.m. on weekends — until 30 minutes after sunset.

However, the proposed changes include an exception to the above time restrictions if neighbors give written permission allowing for the use of such equipment during the restricted hours. Another caveat is that equipment used to resolve an emergency situation is exempt, though this is subject to the city manager's interpretation.

Mayor Philip Stoddard, who drafted the proposal, modeled it after noise ordinances in Sacramento and Sarasota. He said the intent was to “provide more peace and quiet” for residents.

“The commercial mowing services tend to be pretty loud,” Stoddard said, “and their operation is disruptive to general peace and quiet on weekends.”

Stoddard said he had not considered the residential gas-powered leaf-blower ban at first, but added it in after he heard from residents that they wanted to prohibit leaf-blowers. “Everybody who wrote to me wanted to see the leaf-blowers banned,” he said.

Resident Antoinette Fischer said she sees gas-powered leaf-blowers as filthy polluters that pose a health hazard because of the dirt, pollen and other small particles they kick-up into the air.

According to the California Environmental Protection Agency, one hour of leaf-blower use emits more than 26 times the amount of carbon monoxide, and more than 400 times the hydrocarbon emissions, produced by driving a new car at 30 mph for one hour. However, cars made before 1975 that don't have a catalytic converter produced three times as much CO in an hour as a leaf-blower, and about as much hydrocarbon emissions.

Fischer sees leaf blowers as an annoyance not only because of how loud they can be, but as a violation of personal space.

“It's been an ongoing problem,” Fischer said, and she sees the proposed ordinance as the solution.

But at least one commercial landscaper that serves South Miami, Jim Giffen of Selective Cut Inc., called the proposal “ludicrous.” He said that other lawn maintenance equipment such as chainsaws can be just as loud as gas-powered leaf-blowers. He also said electric leaf-blowers are underpowered and slow in comparison to their internal-combustion counterparts. Besides, he asked “where are you gonna plug-in?”

Giffen also took issue with the prohibition of the use of lawn-maintenance equipment by commercial landscapers on weekends, and he predicted a loss of income as a result, saying Saturdays are particularly important.

The City of Coral Gables considered a similar proposal in 2010. The ordinance was approved on first-reading, but later tabled after stiff resistance from some residents. The city never took up the proposal again.

“There were too many issues with a leaf-blower ban,” Vice Mayor Bill Kerdyk said. “We thought that by implementing a blower ordinance, it would cause too much stress and angst for our residents that wanted to keep their property clean.”

However, Kerdyk noted that the city already restricts when leaf-blowers and other noisy lawn equipment can be used.

The South Miami proposal was approved unanimously on first-reading. South Miami City Hall is located at 6130 Sunset Drive, and Tuesday’s commission meeting begins at 7 p.m.

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