

**CITY OF ALBANY
CITY COUNCIL AGENDA
STAFF REPORT**

Agenda Date: November 20, 2013

SUBJECT: Proposed Leaf Blower Ordinance

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BACKGROUND

The Sustainability Committee discussed the possibility of a leaf blower ban in May 2008 in an attempt to reduce noise pollution. The discussion of a ban was tabled because the City's Noise Ordinance prohibits noise lasting longer than 1 minute at 70 decibels, and no longer than 5 minutes at 65 decibels, which captures most leaf blowers. The item was brought back to the Committee on July 17, 2013 to discuss health concerns regarding particulate matter in the air.

DISCUSSION

Cities in California that have banned blowers include Berkeley, Piedmont, Claremont, Carmel, Santa Monica, Mill Valley, Menlo Park, Santa Barbara, and Palo Alto. Some cities, such as Berkeley, have only banned gasoline-powered blowers but still allow electric blowers. Other cities, such as Piedmont, have banned residential use of blowers but allow city officials to use them on public property. Another alternative for cities is to allow blowers during working hours but ban their use on weekends.

Alternate equipment includes rakes, brooms, leaf vacuums and electric leaf blowers. Electric blowers minimize engine pollution and lessen noise, but still leave intact the hazards associated with particulate matter. A study conducted by Los Angeles Department of Water & Power found that rakes can be just as effective as leaf blowers in certain tasks. Other cities have found that leaf vacuums lessen noise and are successful in achieving a reduction in dust pollution.

Leaf blowers stir up mold, allergens, pesticides, and fecal contaminants from the ground into the air, worsening allergies and asthma and irritating the lungs. Street dust that is blown up includes lead, organic carbon, and elemental carbon according to the Air Resources Board. Another study also found arsenic, cadmium, chromium, nickel and mercury in the dust. Particulate matter can increase the number and severity of asthma attacks, cause or aggravate bronchitis or other lung disease, and reduce our ability to fight infections. The American Lung Association of New York state submitted a letter in 2008 that "commends the towns and villages across the Lower Hudson Valley that took a positive step to protect lung health by passing leaf blower ordinances."

The World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored a report about healthy noise levels, and determined that leaf blowers fall outside of the healthy range. According to the EPA, there is a growing body of evidence that strongly suggests a link between exposure to noise and the development and aggravation of a number of heart disease problems. Noise causes stress and the body reacts with increased adrenaline, changes in the heart rate, and elevated blood pressure.

According to operator's manuals, everyone within 50 feet of a blower in use should be wearing hearing, eye and breathing protection. Leaf blowers can lead to noise-induced hearing damage for users. A normal decibel level, considered acceptable in residential areas, is about 60 decibels. Every increase in decibels means noise that is 10 times louder. Leaf-blowers usually generate about 70-75 decibels. According to the EPA this level of noise actually degrades quality of life by interfering with communication and sleep, leads to reduced accuracy of work and increased levels of aggravation, which can linger hours after exposure.

City maintenance staff uses leaf blowers for landscaping projects, to blow dust out of potholes before patching, clearing pathways at parks, and maintaining the sandbox at the Tot Lot. Maintenance workers have expressed the need for leaf blowers to perform these functions in a timely manner, as they already have limited staff. A ban on leaf blowers would also be difficult for larger Urban Forestry projects.

The Albany Unified School District uses leaf blowers at all school sites. Although they are not required to comply with City ordinances, Facilities Supervisor Don Albright stated that they currently comply with all City ordinances and hope to continue that practice. That said, banning leaf blowers for landscaping at the school sites would not be feasible for AUSD based on their current workload and staff constraints.

The City of Albany does not currently have code enforcement staff to follow-through on an ordinance of this nature. Several other cities with leaf blower bans are not actively enforcing them. Staff is hesitant to pass an ordinance without a strategy for enforcement.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT

Banning leaf blowers could have a modest impact on greenhouse gas emissions in Albany. A gasoline powered leaf blower generates as much tailpipe emissions in one hour as an automobile does over 100 miles. A two-stroke commercial blower generates 277 lbs. of volatile organic compounds, 825 lbs. of carbon monoxide and 3.3 lbs. of particulates per year.

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.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

It has been argued by leaf blower operators that the use of rakes and brooms would cause cleanup jobs to take up to twice as long to complete. There is no evidence of increase in the cost of lawn care when blowers are banned. In none of the cities that have already banned blowers is there any evidence of resulting tax increases, or of financial hardship to gardeners. The city of Laguna Beach has banned all types of blowers since 1993 and enjoys 95% compliance. The city uses brooms and rakes to maintain city parks with no impact on costs or cleanliness. The city of Claremont, which banned blowers in 1990, has discovered that their grounds crews are actually saving an hour a day per crew using sidewalk vacuums instead of leaf blowers.