

PD Editorial: Leaf blowers are sufficiently regulated

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Sonoma's fight over leaf blowers is back. That should surprise no one; this is a battle decades in the making.

The Sonoma City Council has heard it all: the complaints, the landscapers' objections to a ban and the compromise of restricted hours and days. Two years ago, an outright ban on gas-powered leaf blowers narrowly failed. Now council is reviewing the issue.

While the dustup is worthy of a renewed debate, Sonoma is not unified in opposition, and the council is closely split. Tighter enforcement of current limits warrants more attention before more regulations are enacted. The issue returns to the council in September.

It's hard to fathom today, but before 1970 the powerful, incessant growl of the leaf blower had not been heard ... or protested.

Its introduction happened to coincide with an earlier drought in California, leading to quick adoption as water use to clean up gardens was restricted. Sound familiar?

Almost as quickly, protests mounted. Some of the wealthiest enclaves adopted noise nuisance bans. Carmel did so in 1975, and Beverly Hills joined in 1978. By 1990, five California cities banned leaf blowers.

Santa Monica banned all leaf blowers in 1991. The Office of Sustainability and the Environment there offers a fact sheet of woes linked to the blowers. In 2000, the California Air Resources Board produced a lengthy report for the legislature on significant health and environmental impacts.

Studies find that blowers can send dust, herbicides, pesticides and fecal contaminants up into the air, especially troubling asthmatics and allergy sufferers. Nevertheless, sales skyrocketed.

Twenty California cities now ban leaf blowers, sometimes only in residential neighborhoods and usually targeting gasoline-powered equipment. The list includes Berkeley, Beverly Hills, Claremont, Hermosa Beach, Laguna Beach, Los Altos, Los Angeles, Malibu, Menlo Park, Mill Valley and Palo Alto. Another 80 cities, including Sonoma, have ordinances restricting either usage or noise level or both. Other cities have considered and rejected bans.

Current Sonoma daytime restrictions offer reasonable limits short of an outright ban. Blowers are banned on Sundays and city-observed holidays, and the noise level maximum was lowered from 90 decibels to 70.

The noise particularly bothers people who work at home, stay home for an illness or try to sleep in the daytime, but daytime is the more appropriate time for decibels than after dark.

Landscapers and gardeners have a point that the equipment saves time and money. Besides, they are hardly the only irritating noisemakers; weed whackers and edge trimmers aren't far behind. Neighbors acting more neighborly if problems appear would go a long way toward fixing problems, without enacting more regulations.

Two years ago, then-Mayor Ken Brown initially backed and then opposed a ban, arguing the act would hurt working gardeners. The current mayor also opposes a ban.

The rest of today's council appears more amenable to a ban on gas-powered models. But not all aggravation and annoyance can be fixed with legislation. If gas blowers bite the dust, where does the regulation stop?

Expect the rhetoric to blow loudly. But let's give the current restrictions more of a chance to succeed. Neighbors showing a little more courtesy could solve more than just noise complaints.