

In Support of an Ordinance to Ban, Limit, or Regulate the Use or Gas-Powered Leaf Blowers

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By Mark Niedergang, Ward 5 City Councilor and Pamela Kennedy, Ward 5 Resident

We submit the statement below in support of this order:

That the City Solicitor and the Director of the Office of Sustainability and the Environment work with the Ward 5 Councilor to draft the strongest possible ordinance to ban, limit or regulate the use of gas-powered leaf blowers, as they are extremely noisy, pollute the air with gas fumes and fine dust particles that are harmful when airborne, especially to the operator, and are completely unnecessary for clearing leaves in Somerville.

Statement of purpose

Cities around the country, such as Washington DC, are banning the use of leaf blowers because of public health and environmental concerns. (See "Get Off My Lawn: How a small group of activists, our correspondent among them, got leaf blowers banned in the nation's capital," by James Fallows, The Atlantic, April 2019 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/04/james-fallows-leaf-blower-ban/583210/>)

In the Greater Boston area, cities and towns including Cambridge, Brookline, Arlington, Concord, Lincoln, and Newton, have placed limits and regulations on the use of leaf blowers, or have been considering such action.

The City of Somerville currently places no specific restrictions on leaf blowers, even though these machines -- by their very design -- are contrary to the City's commitment to sustainability and public health.

We propose a ban on the use of all gas-powered leaf blowers because of the unreasonable burden they place on the health of residents and on the people who operate them, because of the noise pollution they create, and because these tools are major contributors to air pollution.

Definition of leaf blower

Leaf blowers are defined as portable, handheld or backpack-style power equipment that is powered by fossil fuel and used in any landscape maintenance, construction, property repair, or property maintenance for the purpose of blowing, moving, removing, dispersing or redistributing leaves, dust, dirt, grass clippings, cuttings and trimmings from trees and shrubs or any other type of litter or debris.

Concerns that lead to support for a ban

Pollution and harmful fumes: Gas-powered leaf blowers create an extraordinary amount of pollution, and considerably more pollution than battery-powered blowers. According to the California Environmental Protection Agency, operating a commercial leaf blower for one hour would emit [more pollution than driving a 2016 Toyota Camry for about 1,100 miles](#). In addition, gas-powered leaf blowers do not burn efficiently, creating a cloud of gas fumes that can endanger the operator of the machine.

Noise pollution: Both gas- and battery-powered leaf blowers may generate more than 100 decibels of noise. That's loud enough to damage the hearing of operators. Just as concerning, the machines, by their very design, violate Somerville's noise ordinances. The city caps extended periods of noise at 70 decibels during day-time hours. Many leaf-blower operators cannot comply with that ordinance because their machines use low-cost engines that generate at least 80 db of noise.

Dust pollution: Both gas- and battery-powered leaf blowers stir up clouds of dust that may contain dangerous particles of lead and other heavy metals, as well as animal feces, including rodent feces, as well as other noxious and dangerous materials.

Blowing the problem onto someone else's property: Oftentimes, leaf-blower operators scatter debris into neighbors' yards or into the sidewalk and street. The design of the tool encourages this behavior because leaf-blowing machines scatter debris rather than collecting it into a pile.

Special emergency exceptions

The ordinance would not apply to municipal operators and municipal contractors using leaf blowers for emergency operations and clean-up during or following storms, hurricanes, flooding, snowstorms, and other natural or human-caused disasters, to the extent that the City reasonably determines that such use is necessary for safety reasons and that alternative measures are not feasible.