

Proposal to Address Noise and other Impacts from Gas-Powered Leaf Blowers

Summary of proposal:

The Chevy Chase Village Environment and Energy Committee proposes that the Village take actions parallel to those recently implemented by the Washington, DC Council, which are:

- ◆ to phase out gas-powered leaf blowers and phase in more environmentally acceptable leaf blowers effective no later than January 1, 2022, and
- ◆ prior to that time to conduct an educational and outreach campaign to facilitate a shift to battery-powered or electric-powered equipment.

Summary of problem that the proposal intends to address:

Village residents regularly complain to Environment and Energy Committee members and to Village Management about the noise from gas-powered leaf blowers. Many landscape maintenance service providers in our area continue to use two-stroke gas powered leaf blowers that generate noise and harmful pollutants. This practice comes with high costs for our health, environment, and enjoyment of the benefits of living in the Village. This is even more true as more and more people in the Village are working from home.

Noise: Gas leaf blowers produce noise levels that greatly exceed those recommended by the World Health Organization. Noise from commercial gas leaf blowers typically exceeds 100 decibels (“dBs”) at the ear of the operator. The Environmental Protection Agency and the World Health Organization have declared outdoor noise levels above 55 dBs to be harmful to health. Because dBs are measured on a logarithmic scale, a difference on the order of 45 or more dBs represents a large change in the intensity of noise and potential harm to health. This level of noise can damage hearing, interfere with sleep, and increase blood pressure, adrenaline, and heart rates, violating the peace of neighborhoods.

Toxic air pollution: Gas-powered leaf blowers emit large quantities of harmful air pollutants that can affect landscaping company workers as well as our neighbors and are often used out of compliance with manufacturer recommendations that no more than one blower be used at a time. The two-stroke engines used in gas-powered leaf blowers burn their fuel less completely than the four-stroke engines typically used in cars and other larger equipment. Gas-powered leaf blowers emit relatively large quantities of ozone-forming chemicals, fine particulate matter, carbon monoxide and a variety of other toxic air pollutants. These chemicals are toxic and carcinogenic and can be inhaled by equipment operators and nearby residents, as well as contribute meaningfully to regional air pollution problems. Gas-powered leaf blowers are also a source of local greenhouse gas emissions. The State of California has determined that operating a commercial gas leaf blower for one hour as much ozone-forming pollution as driving a Toyota Camry 1,100 miles and in parts of Sout air pollution emissions of these small engines will exceed the emissions of automobiles in Southern California by the year 2020.

Harmful health impacts: Air pollutants emitted by gas-powered blowers are well known causes of, or contributors to, premature mortality, cardiovascular disease, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, premature births, and other adverse health impacts. Even short-

term exposure can be harmful. Workers, children, seniors, and people with chronic illness are at greatest risk.

Existing enforcement: Currently the County regulates noise from landscaping equipment through its general decibel-level noise restrictions. Decibel-based regulations are difficult to enforce, in part because most potential citizen complainants and even enforcement officers lack the ability or knowledge to accurately measure and record noise levels and/or may arrive too late to record the event. The impracticality of its existing decibel-based noise regulations was a driving factor in DC's enactment of a phase out of gas-powered leaf blowers.

Alternatives to gas-powered leaf blowers now include more efficient battery-powered leaf blowers which get the job done but do not emit toxic pollutants and are quieter (decibel levels are typically 65 dB or less at a distance of 50 ft). A recent research study showed that a gas-powered leaf blower rated at 65 dB(A) emits noise that travels considerably further and more readily penetrates the walls/windows of houses than does a battery-powered leaf blower rated at the same decibel level. The difference is the strong low frequency component of the gas leaf blower noise compared to that of their battery electric counterparts. Battery powered leaf blowers are also potentially carbon neutral if users offset their electricity source with renewable energy.

Proposal:

The Environment and Energy Committee recommends that the Village follow in the footsteps of the District of Columbia, as well as other communities across the country, to phase out gas-powered leaf blowers. In the period before such a prohibition would go into effect, an informational and outreach campaign to both homeowners and contractors should be mounted to encourage the use of much quieter battery-powered or corded electric equipment, or manual equipment, in preference to gas-powered equipment. These outreach efforts could be coordinated with neighboring communities and potentially ride the coattails of the campaign that DC will be conducting.

While gas-powered *lawn mowers* also create substantial noise and pollution, the Committee is recommending that the phase out specifically address gas-powered *leaf blowers at this time*. We think addressing leaf blowers will encounter less resistance than tightening restrictions on lawn mowers because we will be following the path that Washington, DC has already taken and because many view gas-powered leaf blowers as the most offensive of lawn maintenance equipment; in the last decade they have become nearly a year-round tool for landscapers. While the current proposal addresses only gas-powered leaf blowers, it may have carry-over effects for gas-powered mowers and other landscaping equipment. First, the educational campaigns we propose could highlight the benefits and effectiveness of a variety of types of electric and battery-powered landscape equipment, not only leaf blowers. Second, when landscapers and homeowners become familiar with battery-powered blowers once a phase out is in effect, they will likely also become more interested in and comfortable with other electric or battery-powered landscape equipment and the companies that sell that equipment.

The environment committees of the Town of Chevy Chase and Somerset are planning to present a proposal similar to this one to their governing bodies and have expressed interest in coordinating on educational initiatives mentioned below.

Our proposal would look like the following:

- a. The Village Board enacts **a full ban on gas-powered leaf-blowers to go into effect no later than January 1, 2022**, mirroring the DC ban. Prior to this, the following actions could be taken:
- b. Phase in the ban by expanding quiet periods prior to January 1, 2022. For example, in the fall of 2020 use of gas-powered leaf blowers could be restricted in the morning for one or more hours beyond the end of current quiet hours (8 a.m. on weekday/9:00 a.m. on weekends). The goal would be to motivate landscapers and residents who want to work during that period to purchase a battery-powered leaf blower for use during that time, thereby encouraging gradual transitions to battery-powered equipment.
- c. Educational campaign for residents about the environmental and quality of life-related implications of landscape choices, including landscape equipment. The campaign could include workshops and handouts or mailings for residents, including a list of “quiet landscape contractors.” (Could coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions.)
- d. Educational campaign and demonstrations of battery-powered equipment for landscapers, and where to purchase this equipment. (Could coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions.)
- e. Explore group purchase discounts for quiet landscaping equipment for both residents and landscape companies. (Could coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions.)
- f. Help Village management prepare Terms of Reference to contract with a quiet landscaping company when the new contract comes up for bid (Could coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions.)
- g. Design enforcement protocols for the phase out period and ban.