

My View: The art of compromise

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By Andy Levin

Lost amid the hoopla surrounding the inauguration, the women's protest marches and the Patriots winning yet another trip to the Super Bowl was an act of political compromise that deserves some attention.

Make no mistake about it: I'm no supporter of the updated leaf blower ordinance overwhelmingly approved by the City Council last week. In a nutshell, the new regulations will end up penalizing landscapers, residents who rely on a landscaper, and large-property owners. Moreover, it will put more pressure on the enforcement agents - the police and inspectional services departments - that are already dealing with immense workloads.

At the core of my disagreement remains a strong belief that the new leaf blower regulations were designed and approved to satisfy a relatively small minority of residents. Do most residents find the noise of a 77-decibel leaf blower at full power for several minutes somewhat annoying? Definitely. But merely disliking the sound of a blower (or any other loud power tool) is a far cry from being bothered so much by the noise that it can barely be tolerated. Conversations I've had with scores of residents about this subject, over the course of more than two years, suggests the latter group is distinctly outnumbered.

Minorities have rights, of course, but in the case of the leaf blower ordinance it seems to me the cost of extending these special rights to perhaps a couple thousand people in a city of 90,000 is unfair to the majority of residents. The new ordinance will result in higher costs for leaf clearing because by cracking down on the prohibited use of the more-powerful 77-decibel leaf blowers (by mandating a manufacturer's sticker be attached to the tool), landscapers will lose efficiency. It takes much longer to clear a yard using 65-decibel leaf blowers and time, after all, is money.

There were better ways to address the concerns of residents terribly bothered by the noise, such as limiting the number of blowers allowed per property, based on square footage.

All of this being said, something positive came out of last Tuesday's rather dysfunctional City Council meeting, which spent close to four hours debating the matter: What would have been a complete ban in the summer months eventually gave way to an amendment that prohibits only the use of gas-powered blowers Memorial Day through Labor Day, allowing residents and landscapers to use a battery-powered or electric blower to clear grass clippings after mowing.

Now, I don't think this was the best alternative to an all-out summer ban; allowing the use of 65-decibel leaf blowers for no more than five minutes would have been a better option. But the amendment was certainly better than forcing folks to rely on raking, a truly time-consuming task.

The art of compromise means both sides get something and no one goes away truly satisfied. This was most definitely the case with the summer months' leaf blower regulations approved last week. Ward 1 City Councilor Alison Leary, who spearheaded the campaign to further restrict leaf blower use, deserves great credit for supporting the compromise, notwithstanding the disapproval of many who supported a complete summer ban. Such statesmanship, especially regarding an intensely contentious issue, reminds one of how politics is supposed to function.