

Leaf-Blower Ban Sees Mixed Results After a Year

City officials saying the enforcement of the ban is having an impact, but some residents say it's "a joke."

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In Santa Monica, leaf blowers were supposed to be gone with the wind. Last year, the [Santa Monica City Council](#) took special care in making sure [a decades-long ban on leaf blowers within city limits was enforced](#), in hopes of getting rid of them for good. But the gas-powered machines—which are bad for the environment and annoying to many residents—are still around.

Part of the amendments, which went into effect Oct. 28, 2010, tasked the [Office of Sustainability and the Environment](#) with enforcing the law. Since then, the office has made numerous efforts not only to enforce the law, but also to educate the community on why the law is necessary.

“We knew the number of violations would be high,” OSE Watershed Management Program Coordinator Neal Shapiro said. “But thanks to our division’s community outreach programs, including bilingual educational classes showcasing alternatives to leaf-blower machines for maintenance gardeners and informational pamphlets for both gardeners and homeowners, we’ve helped the community find alternatives to these machines.”

For the six-month period through April 30, 2011, OSE received a total of 1,133 reports of leaf-blowing activity from the public.

The OSE is preparing its second report on the ban for distribution next month, which will have updated numbers on the violations from the past six months.

Shapiro says these numbers show that, so far, the OSE's enforcement of the ordinance has been a success.

"Before the new prohibition procedures last October, few violations were given out, and blower use was widespread," he said. "With the new enforcement procedures, the program has been a huge success in giving the public someone to call or email right on the spot, and getting an immediate response and results."

However, results from the community regarding the ban have been mixed.

Despite the increased enforcement, most residents who spoke with Santa Monica Patch said they have not noticed a decrease in leaf blowers. One woman, who asked not to be named, said she had no idea the ban existed and had not noticed a difference in the past year.

Recent Santa Monica transplant John Tant said he didn't notice the lack of leaf blowers either.

"It doesn't bother me one way or the other, and I haven't noticed a difference," he said.

Mike, a resident who asked that his last name not be used, said he hasn't noticed the lack of leaf blowers, but the alternative tools the landscapers use bother him.

"A landscaper rakes outside my house on cement all the time, and it really annoys me," he said. "I just want to yell at him to get a push-broom."

Kirsten, who lives on Third Street and also requested that her last name not be used, said she feels like her multiple complaints about leaf blowers have fallen on deaf ears, despite the increased enforcement.

"Every time we call to complain to the department, nobody ever gets a ticket," she said. "Nobody ever comes. So it's a waste of time. It's a joke, really."

Shapiro admitted that one of the main challenges the OSE faces in enforcing the ban is the large number of complaints it receives.

"The sheer number of violation reports, responding to all of them and getting the warning letters in the mail in a timely manner is a challenge," he said. "Also a challenge [is] developing a new database to enter and track violations in an efficient manner, so we can be responsive to the public when queries come in."

Another segment of the community, however, has definitely felt the effects of the ban. Local landscape maintenance companies told Santa Monica Patch the strict enforcement of the leaf-blower ban has had a significant effect on their businesses.

Allan Howard of Westchester Landscape Management said not being able to use leaf blowers has created so much extra work for his employees, he has to charge his Santa Monica customers 15 percent more for the extra labor.

“It’s probably worth it for the environment. Even I don’t like the noise,” Howard admitted. “But my employees have to use a broom, which is very labor-intensive.”

Howard said he has noticed the OSE’s heavy enforcement over the past year. He has repeatedly warned his employees that if they receive a leaf-blower violation, they must pay it out of their own pocket.

“I understand the point with the noise and the dust,” Howard said. “There are upsides to the ban. But from a professional standpoint, it is less efficient. But, it is the law and we have to abide by it.”

Shapiro said his office hopes initiatives like the enforcement of the ban may encourage the landscaping industry to produce more environmentally friendly alternatives to leaf-blower machines in the future.

Such alternative products are available. Dan Goshin owns a West Hollywood-based landscaping service called Mow, Rake Sow, and it uses electric leaf blowers. The machines emit less pollution, since they don’t run on gas, and are up to 50 percent quieter.

“I’m environmentally conscious, so I saw [using electric leaf blowers] as an opportunity,” Goshin said. “People complain about the noise and the smell, and I wanted to provide a healthier option for my employees.”

However, Goshin said he realizes the eco-friendly blowers he uses might not be affordable for everyone in the city. The electric blowers aren’t as durable, and he has to replace them more often than gas blowers. He said, because of the extra cost of alternative products, strict enforcement of anti-leaf-blower laws may not be the best choice for the city.

“I agree with the idea for the ban,” he said. “But there should be a free-market, incentive-based approach, rather than strict enforcement.”

The leaf-blower ban has been law in Santa Monica since 1992. The law originally stated: “No person shall operate any leaf blower (gas, electric, or battery powered) within the city. A leaf blower is defined as any motorized tool (gas, electric, or battery powered) used to propel fallen leaves and debris for removal.”

However, the law was considered a nuisance issue and was not heavily enforced. Therefore, the city council decided last year to amend the law and to view leaf blowers as more of an environmental concern rather than simply a noise concern.

Shapiro said the OSE received overwhelmingly positive responses from the community to begin stronger enforcement of the bill.

“[The community was] vocally supportive at the city council meeting, in addition to the numerous emails supporting its adoption,” he said.

The OSE makes it relatively easy to report a violation of the ordinance. Community members can call, email or even download a smartphone app to report a violation. OSE officials also go on weekly patrols around the city looking for offenders.

Despite the multiple reported violations, Shapiro said he believes only two to four people have actually received the \$250 fine for first-time offenses. That's is because the office ensures each person receives a minimum of two warnings before they are fined. Shapiro emphasized that the city is not making big bucks off the ordinance.

“Our aim is not to collect fines but to educate the community and landscape businesses about sustainable alternatives,” he said. “We use enforcement measures, like fines, as a last resort.”