

# Reps look to quiet lawn care

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STAMFORD — On a frigid January night, seven city representatives gathered on the Government Center's fourth-floor patio, braving the cold for a demonstration in leaf blowers.

As the wind blew, and the representatives rubbed their hands together, the leaf blowers were fired up one after the other. A worker from the parks and recreation handled each device, revving the blowers' engines so those gathered could hear the machines' power. The worker walked about the patio, maneuvering the gas- and electric-powered blowers as if he were dispersing leaves from its deck, as board members listened intently for the differences in sound between each machine.

One board member wandered off from the pack to listen from a distance, so he could better judge the noise these commonly used lawn-care devices make in a residential setting.

The demonstration was part of ongoing discussions among the legislative and rules committee, which is looking to amend the city's noise ordinance. The board is considering changes that could potentially ban the use of some leaf blowers.

They were joined by Larry Will, vice president of engineering (retired) at Echo Inc., a company that manufactures lawn-care equipment. Will had flown in from Arkansas, at the board's request, to give his expertise on blowers, and discuss their environmental impact.

As board members listened to the different blowers, they commented on the noise each blower made, with some quipping that the electric blowers sounded like giant hair dyers. The quietest model was a \$250 gas-power Echo backpack blower (65 decibel (dB) output).

Landscapers and park officials prefer gas-powered blowers because they allow for more mobility, according to Will.

Among the changes the board is considering, are requiring the use of blowers with a specific decibel output level, and restricting the hours blowers can be used during the day.

"I think we would try to incorporate (decibel levels and hours) into any changes we make to the ordinance," said Arthur Layton (R-17), vice chair of the committee. "Of course (enforcing) the hours would be easier to do."

At Monday night's meeting, board members vetted the differences in decibel levels perceived by the human ear, the environmental impact of gas-powered and electric-powered blowers, and how other municipalities have regulated the use of lawn-care equipment.

The meeting was a continuation of research conducted by legislative aides into the environmental and health impacts of blowers.

Will spoke at length about the advancements the industry has made in manufacturing blowers that are quieter, and more environmentally friendly. He cautioned the board against banning the use of all blowers, saying that path has not worked for other cities.

"You're going to see a lot of people using their garden hoses to clean off their driveways," Will said, adding that this practice could affect the city's water supply.

Will believes that a better practice would be to require the use of blowers that measure a certain decibel output — such as 65 dBs or less. It also suggested the idea of requiring training for operators to alert them to blower issues and impact of improper use.

"I thought he was fairly objective, and presented a good side from the industry point of view," Layton said.

The board first began discussions about amending the ordinance last November when some residents complained to representatives about excessive noise from lawn-care equipment being used on weekends, Layton said.

"I think that if residents had respected the complaints of other homeowners, this issue would not be in front of the board today," Layton said.

A noise ordinance limiting domestic power equipment was passed in 1985 but the language does not address commercial power equipment.

The committee did not pinpoint a specific decibel standard for blowers, but at last November's meeting, it had considered setting the decibel output of blowers at 65 dBs.

Will said recently manufactured blowers are labeled with the device's decibel output level. The label is in accordance with standards set by the American National Standards

Institute (ANSI), which measures lawn-care equipment's decibel output 50 feet from the source, according to Will and information he presented to the committee.

Drafting of the ordinance was held until the committee could extensively review the material presented by Will and aids. According to Layton, the committee would like to have a public hearing before the ordinance is drafted.

"We'd like to have it in place by spring, so contractors and landscapers have enough time to prepare (for any changes)," Layton said. "(As of now) we're not close to going before the board."

Local noise ordinances must conform to the state noise control plan and need the approval of the state's Commissioner of Environmental Protection, before they can be enforced, according to the state's general statutes. Once a draft has been submitted to the Department of Environmental Protection for review, a decision on the ordinance is usually made within two weeks.