

**Testimony of Grif Johnson of Quiet Clean DC before the
D.C. Council's Committee of the Whole
Regarding the Leaf Blower Regulation Amendment Act
of 2017 (B22-234)
July 2, 2018**

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of this Committee. I'm Grif Johnson,¹ one of the founders of Quiet Clean DC. We're a group of D.C. residents who are concerned about a significant problem in our city and, indeed, all around the country. That problem is the invasive, harmful noise generated by the gas-powered leaf blower.

I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing. I also want to thank Council Member Cheh for introducing the bill that's under consideration today by this Committee, and Council Members Bonds, Grosso, McDuffie, and Allen for co-sponsoring it. We also thank those additional Council Members who've assured us of their support for the legislation.

The bill in question will amend the District of Columbia Noise Control Act of 1977.² That Act stated that chief among its purposes are – and I quote – “. . . to preserve, protect and promote . . . the peace and comfort of the inhabitants of the city,”³

¹ For the record, my full name is John Griffith Johnson, Jr.

² D.C. Law 2-53, effective March 16, 1978, Vol. 24 D.C. Register 5293 (Dec. 30, 1977).

³ Section 2 of the 1977 Act reads in its entirety: “The purpose of this act is to provide comprehensive regulations to control noise levels in the District of Columbia so as to preserve, protect and promote the public health, safety and welfare, and the peace and comfort of the inhabitants of the city, and prevent injury to humans, animals and property. It is the intent of the Council of the District of Columbia that this act be liberally construed to effect its general purpose.”

Subsequent to the 1977 Act, the Council in 1992 adopted a regulation that addresses leaf blowers specifically. That regulation limits both their hours of operation and their noise output to no more than 70 decibels at a distance of 50 feet.⁴

But the regulation doesn't work. As you'll hear today from witnesses who support the bill, your constituents across the District are up in arms over the deprivation of their peace and comfort from excessively noisy gas-powered leaf blowers. More than a quarter of the Advisory Neighborhood Commissions in D.C., representing seven of our city's eight wards, have adopted resolutions endorsing the bill. Over 2,300 individuals have signed an on-line petition urging the Council to move forward on this bill. We hear it from every corner of the city: "Stop the noise!"

Why doesn't the current regulation work? Because it requires, for its effective enforcement, that an appropriate agent of the D.C. government must verify the operation of a leaf blower above the 70 decibel limit and beyond the 50-foot distance. That means the enforcing agent must come to the scene of the violation while it's underway, and armed with a sound meter and a distance measuring tool for which he would need to have been specially trained, confirm the violation. It simply isn't practical for all that to happen before the operator of the violating equipment will have ceased such operation or will have moved on to another property where he'll engage in a new violation.

And there's another reason why the current regulation isn't effective. That's because the regulation relies solely on sound measurements in decibels. That approach overlooks the most offensive element of noise produced uniquely by leaf blowers that are powered by gas. As you'll hear in a few minutes, research that my colleagues on this panel -- Mr. Pollock and Dr. Banks -- will present to you this afternoon establishes that what differentiates

⁴ Section 20-2808 of the D.C. Municipal Regulations.

the gas blower's noise is **a very strong low-frequency component** that a battery-powered blower having an identical decibel rating as the gas blower doesn't generate with the same strength. That powerful low-frequency element is the source of the greatest offense to the human ear.

The complaints all relate to noise from gas-powered leaf blowers. These blowers generate not only **high levels of the most disturbing low-frequency sound components**, but also enormous decibel outputs, well above the limits for safe human exposure. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last year published a finding that two hours of exposure to a leaf blower operating at 85 decibels will cause hearing loss.⁵ And hearing loss is permanent; once your hearing has gone, you can't get it back.

The defenders of these thunderous gas blowers actually brag about them. Consider an article recently published in opereviews.com, an on-line publication for the landscaping industry.⁶ The article gets right to the point. Here are the first two sentences:

“What does it feel like to have Hurricane Irma strapped to your shoulders? Donning any of the leading backpack blowers will give you a close representation.”

The article notes that seven models of the most popular gas blowers deliver sound at the operator's ear of between 101 and 104 decibels. Decibels are measured logarithmically, so that a difference of as little as three decibels represents a doubling of the

⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/pdf/2017-02-vitalsigns.pdf>

⁶ <https://opereviews.com/landscaping/leaf-blowers/best-backpack-blower-shootout/>

sound's energy. We're talking noise that's several orders of magnitude above the CDC limit of 85 decibels.

Proponents of the gas blower claim a so-called "quieter" gas blower is now available. In a few moments, you'll hear Mr. Pollock play for you an audio clip of this supposedly "quiet" gas blower, including **that low-frequency component that's so uniquely powerful with gas blowers.** You can decide for yourself whether this so-called "quiet" gas blower is, indeed, quiet.

In reality, very few landscaping contractors are using this much-ballyhooed "quiet" gas blower. In an op-ed published in January in totallandscapecare.com, another on-line publication for landscapers,⁷ one of the leading advocates for gas blowers pleads with landscape contractors to start using the supposedly "quieter" gas blower . . . or else cities like ours will adopt laws to phase out gas blowers altogether.

So, returning to our current regulation on leaf blowers; it's unworkable, as I said, because it can't be effectively enforced. But a law that simply bans all gas blowers won't be difficult to enforce, because a gas blower can be easily identified visually, without the need for taking measurements of decibels and distances. And a ban on gas blowers will free all of us from having to endure **that powerful and aggressive low-frequency noise element that the gas blower emits.**

That's why we support this bill – it will work.

⁷ <https://www.totallandscapecare.com/landscaping-equipment/leaf-blower-bans-are-coming/>