

Dear Councilmembers:

I did not appreciate autumn until the summer before eighth grade. By then my academic workload had grown so large that I could not take the time to enjoy the foliage. Each subsequent year of school I had less and less free time, so the beauty of autumn grew more elusive.

After completing school and moving back to Montgomery County, I finally had the opportunity to venture out into nature. I now found, however, that I could not enjoy it. Noise pollution invaded my personal soundscape. It intruded into my home, sometimes depriving me of sleep. One autumn I biked and hiked down the entire Cabin John Trail and, over the course of a few hours, was treated to the noise of seven leaf blowers. In addition, whenever I stepped outside my home, I was hit with exhaust fumes. Whenever I biked past workers with blowers, I ended up with debris in my eyes. Things had devolved to the point where I started driving up to the Catoctins and to Sugarloaf once each autumn just to enjoy the foliage in peace.

I quick bit of research informed me that in 1989 the County Council had passed what they deemed a “compromise,” a noise ordinance limiting leaf blowers to 70 dB as heard from 15 m. I tried asking users of leaf blowers to try to keep the noise down and, when that failed (sometimes with hostile reactions), I reported what sounded like violations. As far as I know, none of these efforts garnered results. The most egregious offender had a magic yellow sticker on his blower, so the Department of Environmental Protection automatically ruled him in compliance and refused to take any action or even to test it. In more recent years, the requirement was added that each complaint have two witnesses. Once, when I tried to report a breach of quiet hours, a police officer called to inform me that no action would be taken, the excuse being that people have to clear out their leaves.

And so it quickly became apparent that the noise ordinance was an abject failure. It was not a compromise but a sellout to users of leaf blowers. With quiet hours lasting from 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM, people could legally start spewing out noise pollution and fumes before sunrise and continue past sunset for much of autumn. The noise of gas-powered blowers could carry for 400 m, virtually

ensuring that I was never out of captive listening range. In summer as I rested between laps at the Tallyho pool, I was frequently bombarded with noise from distant parts of Bells Mill Road.

Hope, however, emerged a couple years ago when the Council passed its ban on gas-powered blowers. As foul as I know them to be, I was quite shocked to read that in an hour one burns enough gasoline to power a car from here to Miami. I looked forward to fresh air greeting me as I emerged from my home and to peace and quiet accompanying my walks and rides. I was quite apprehensive, though, about how people might flout the ban as it took effect.

Then this month came along. Though I did hear the occasional faint sound of a violation, I found the chorus of birds to resound quite a bit more. As the weeks ensued, the peace endured; breaks at the pool proved relaxing for a change. The air refreshed me.

Thus I was dumbfounded to receive an alert that that Council was considering gutting this law not even a month in effect. In watching the testimony about Expedited Bill 19-25, I repeatedly heard the rationale that it provided a seasonal exemption of “only” three months. This exemption, however, happens to span the most beautiful time of the year. As far as I can tell, the ban will not apply for even single day. So again we are talking not compromise but sellout. People with gas-powered blowers will get to fire them up with impunity. Perhaps an acceptable compromise would have been to ban their use on odd dates or to require their users to turn them off when requested to do so.

The owners of landscape companies who testified in support of Expedited Bill 19-25 all show an attitude that became apparent to me decades ago. They want to run their businesses without paying the full operating costs. Instead of putting in the effort to rake debris (which takes no longer than using blowers) or hiring workers to do so, they want to take lazy shortcuts. Up front these “efficient” approaches cost less, but that is because the rest of us involuntarily pay the balance. We sacrifice the health of our planet as greenhouse emissions disrupt the climate. We sacrifice our health by breathing toxic fumes. We pay more for gasoline as others squander it to push every last bit of debris out of yards in the frivolous name of esthetics. We sacrifice peace and quiet in our homes and on our autumn walks,

no matter how deep within our parks we take them.

Enough is enough. This fallacy of the composition has persisted for too long. It is time for to council to defend the weeks-old protection of everyone. A gas-powered blower might make a small plot of land look “good,” but in doing so it makes much greater area smell, sound, and feel horrible. We endure these nuisances for the appearances of yards that we can not even see. The costs to all of us far outweigh the benefits. It is for these reasons that I urge every member to speak and vote against the tyranny of the minority that is the leaf blower lobby. Vote against Expedited Bill 19-25.

Sincerely,

David Núñez