

Montgomery County Council Must Vote Down the Latest Attempt to Undermine the Leaf Blower Ban, Expedited Bill 19-25

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A modified version of this testimony appears as a [commentary](#) in Maryland Matters.

Four members of the Montgomery County Council, led by Council Member Gabe Alborno, want to gut the [ban](#) on the use of gasoline powered leaf blowers that took effect on 1 July. The councilors' eleventh-hour [proposal](#), Expedited Bill 19-25, would let landscaping companies use gasoline powered leaf blowers between 1 October and 31 December, for three years. Under County [code](#), expedited legislation is supposed to be "emergency" legislation that is "necessary for the immediate protection of the public health, safety, or interest."

To the contrary, this bill betrays the public interest. Councilors supporting this proposed exemption are consigning the health and welfare of landscape workers and County residents to the back seat while favoring firms that have failed to prepare for the ban. As writer James Fallows [put](#) it, this amounts to a cruel bargain for workers: People without power jeopardizing their health because those with power aren't willing to shield them from avoidable risks.

The push to undermine the leaf blower ban comes almost two years after the Council [voted](#) for it almost unanimously in September 2023, with an exemption for agricultural producers. Council Member Alborno's latest proposal recalls his failed [attempt](#) in 2023 to exempt for five years large properties, like golf courses. In voting against the exemption, Council member Natali Fani-González, an immigrant, asserted, "This is about the health of low-income workers that we're trying to protect."

The Council has eased the transition to electric powered equipment via a [rebate](#) program. According to the Department of Environmental Protection, about 250 companies--most of them small businesses--have already received those subsidies and more have applied.

Clearly, many companies are preparing conscientiously for the ban. Further, any company managing leaves in the District of Columbia has had to use electric equipment since [2022](#).

Nonetheless, four locally elected officials want to cave to industry laggards, [saying](#) that "Commercial landscapers argue that the ban will significantly harm the industry." No documentation has been offered to support this claim, and the bill mentions no public emergency that would justify its expedited status.

But the hazards of gasoline powered leaf blowers are clear. They are a health menace, especially for vulnerable landscape workers, who are often Spanish speakers and may not know about leaf blower risks. They might not have a choice in the equipment their employers provide. Landscape workers undertake hard labor--often for the very affluent--while earning an average hourly wage in

Maryland of [\\$19.76](#). In 2024, [48 percent](#) of landscaping workers nationally identified as Hispanic or Latino.

Gasoline-powered leaf blowers expose landscape workers to harmful noise levels, which can reach [95 to 106](#) decibels at the user's ears. According to the Centers for Disease Control, a two-hour exposure to a leaf blower blasting at 90 decibels is enough to cause [hearing damage](#).

Hearing loss is associated with a host of problems, including communication difficulties and [dementia](#). Chronic exposure to noise pollution can [cause](#) high blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, depression, and [cognitive impairment](#) in children.

Routine use of gasoline powered leaf blowers exposes community members to disruptive noise. The low-frequency component of the noise produced by gasoline-powered leaf blowers [carries much farther](#) and is perceived as much louder than the noise generated by battery-powered blowers.

A substantial [body of evidence](#) indicates that anthropogenic noise is detrimental to wildlife.

Gasoline powered leaf blowers also expose workers to a toxic air pollution [brew](#) of fine particulate matter, carbon monoxide, carcinogens, oxides of nitrogen, and unburned fuel. They send dirt, excrement, mold, chemicals, and particles flying into the air.

Those same air pollutants threaten public health and the environment. Operating a professional backpack leaf blower for one hour [produces](#) as much ozone-forming air pollution as driving a light duty passenger car 1100 miles. The Baltimore area—which includes Montgomery County's neighbor, Howard County--still [fails](#) to meet EPA's ozone air quality limit. Leaf blowers emit carbon dioxide, and Montgomery County has an aggressive greenhouse gas reduction [goal](#). Reducing nitrogen oxides air pollution is important to the health of the Chesapeake Bay. An estimated [one-third](#) of the Bay's nitrogen load comes from the air.

Montgomery County's ban followed those of a long [list](#) of cities that have paved the way. [Annapolis](#) and [Baltimore City](#) have also adopted bans. Further, in California, new leaf blowers are subject to a zero-emissions [standard](#). Such policies are undoubtedly pushing manufacturers to improve battery powered equipment.

Safer leaf handling methods include rakes and brooms, [leaving the leaves](#), or mulching them with electric equipment.

We will need to keep educating businesses--especially small ones--and County residents about the need to protect workers from gasoline powered leaf blowers. But the Council must not capitulate to companies that are dragging their feet. The Council must vote down the latest Albornoz proposal to weaken the leaf blower ban.
