

Noise won't blow away

Landscape contractors should keep their ears open to the sound of controversy concerning the use of gas-powered leaf blowers.

By ROBIN PENDERGRAST

While the earliest attempt to control and influence leaf blower/power blower use was in Beverly Hills, CA, in the summer of 1976,

the recent controversy covers many states and has many asking "where will it all end?"

The evolution of the sound issue, in concert with emissions issues and local, county and federal legislation, has become a nightmare for commercial landscape contractors and grounds managers.

Since the Beverly Hills event, including the initial legislation that was introduced in Los Angeles in 1986, more than 400 municipalities have discussed controlling lawn and garden equipment and specifically, the noise associated with leaf blowers. In most cases, they have opted for common sense and practical approaches to these issues.

Finding resolution

Two recent cases outline the methods by landscape contractors to resolve this issue.

In Abington, PA, for example, someone read or heard that the way to control leaf blowers or lawn and garden equipment was to get rid of them. This concept became the opposition's answer to the problem.

Calmer and more responsible thoughts prevailed with landscapers and leaf blower activists attempting to create a workable and long-term solution. Collectively, they worked out a compromise.

Some communities impose short-term restrictions (seasonal, time-usage or decibel level), but do so without receiving any outside input. In Abington, the combined efforts of local landscapers, along with the leaf blower activists resulted in a "buffer zone" in and around residential areas. Here, landscape crews were restricted to half-throttle on leaf blowers and other select pieces of lawn and garden equipment.

The response revealed that activists can approach this issue calmly, and that landscape contractors were more than willing to reach a practical solution. Several local and national associations also offer practical information on working safely and quietly within a buffer zone. Using equipment designed specifically for quieter operation also helps.

Concerted efforts

In suburban Highland Park, IL, the program isn't so simple. Four years ago, various antiblower activists and the Environmental Commission, decided that blowers in any format were not needed between May 1st and October 1st. When the ordinance was put in place, challenges began immediately by landscapers.

The antiblower lobby informed the Environmental Commission that the ordinance was not being enforced and that seasonal ordinances and selected time constraints were not easily enforceable. They've been lobbying to ban all products that move debris, including electric, gas-powered, hand-held, backpack, two-wheel and three-wheel walk-behind leaf blowers.

Local organizations, including the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association,

and 11 companies that service most of the upscale homes in Highland Park, consolidated to monitor the situation and voice their opposition to the ordinances. Echo Inc. was also asked to provide support, and joined an ad hoc organization of landscapers working to create a workable solution.

As *Landscape Management* went to press, local landscape companies like Mariani Landscape, Scott Byron & Co. and Fiore & Sons are monitoring the situation and providing the facts to make sure that the potential reality of the "ordinance adjustment" doesn't evolve into a controversial and combative ban on leaf blowers.

Just another chapter? Probably not.

Other communities around the country have attempted to take up the charge, including an activist group in Texas. The goal is often to ban leaf blowers entirely.

Professional and commercial landscape operations must monitor the communities

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in which they work and the technique and temperament of how their equipment is used, particularly leaf blowers.

Often, the statements made and the positions taken are not based on factual information and can have a negative, if not devastating, influence on the day-to-day activities of today's landscape industry. □

The author is a partner at International Marketing Exchange Inc., McHenry, IL, and has represented the industry on noise issues for more than 12 years.