

Cities, towns getting earache

Cracking down on loud music, mowers, more

By Charisse Jones
USA TODAY

You can't strum your guitar in the town square of Portsmouth, N.H., if you're using an amplifier. You risk a big fine if you drive through Greenville, Miss., blasting Britney Spears. And you're free to mow your lawn in North Hempstead on New York's Long Island — just not after 7 on weeknights.

Many thought they could escape the cacophony of the city when they packed up and moved to the 'burbs. But in many towns, it's hard to hear the crickets for all the car alarms, leaf blowers and barking dogs. So along with keeping streets safe, local lawmakers are taking steps to keep them reasonably quiet.

"The essential quality-of-life issue is the ability to sit in your backyard and not be driven nuts," says Fred Pollack, a member of North Hempstead's Town Board, who rewrote much of that community's noise ordinance.

Dozens of other towns and cities are doing the same thing.

Communities are prohibiting the use of leaf blowers and other lawn equipment at certain times, restricting when construction crews can work and threatening to fine people who talk loudly on street corners.

New York City, which has long been known for its round-the-clock noise, is even considering prohibiting ice cream trucks from announcing their arrival with a recorded song. The driver could ring a bell instead.

Car stereos a top priority

Among noise offenders, booming car stereos have recently overtaken leaf blowers and other gadgets as the chief target for new restrictions, says Les Blomberg, executive director of the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse, a non-profit

group based in Montpelier, Vt., that supports initiatives to curb noise.

Under a Detroit noise ordinance that took effect last month, a motorist is in violation if the stereo can be heard 10 feet from the car. "Your freedom to play your music loudly stops at my eardrums," says Detroit councilwoman Barbara-Rose Collins, who sponsored the measure.

Constituents had complained about music blaring from car speakers, and Collins says ear-splitting tunes can be a safety hazard. The driver not only won't be able to hear a police siren or firetruck, she says, "but the person in the car next to him won't hear them."

Environmental concerns

Noise in urban centers was often one of the reasons some residents fled to the suburbs. "For 100 years now, if you had money and you didn't like noise, you could move out of the city," Blomberg says. Now, "you're no longer guaranteed of moving to a quiet place when you move out of the city."

The nature of noise has changed because of electronic amplification and the popularity of devices such as Jet Skis and car alarms.

Although the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Noise Abatement and Control was closed in 1981, people in the past decade increasingly have begun to view noise as an environmental concern, Blomberg says. "As litter is to the landscape," he says, "noise is to the soundscape."

Communities are using noise meters and other methods to keep track of soaring sound levels.

On Saturday night in Tampa's Ybor City entertainment district, for example, police Capt. Russell Marcotrigiano measured sounds for violations at hot spots including the nightclubs Luna Lounge, Chills, Coyote Ugly and Platforms.

He says most club owners are accommodating and try to keep the sound level at the legal limit.

North Hempstead's revised ordinance, approved in October, switched from measuring decibels to a standard of "unreasonable noise," which considers everything from the time of day to location.

Fines on the rise

While penalties include possible jail time and range from \$100 for a first offense to \$1,250 for a third offense within two years, Pollack emphasizes "this was not a revenue raiser. We're not looking for fines. We're looking for peace and quiet."

In Greenville, Miss., the noise ordinance was amended in June to increase the fine for a second offense to \$500.

Previously, the penalty stayed at \$250 no matter how many tickets a violator received.

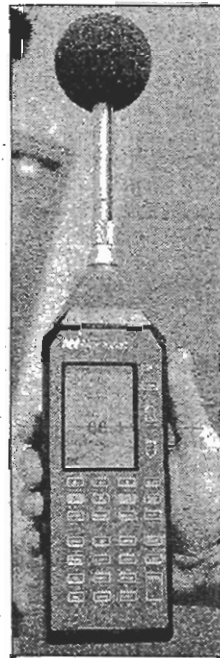
"We felt it would be more of a deterrent," Mayor Heather McTeer-Hudson says of the increase.

The noise ordinance for the city of roughly 43,000 people calls for quiet zones around hospitals, nursing homes, schools and churches. Music from a car's audio system can't be heard more than 50 feet away.

McTeer-Hudson, 28 and a fan of hip-hop, says she sees both sides of the debate.

"I understand that people want to listen to their music, but at the same time you have to be considerate," she says. "As technology con-

tinues to develop, there are issues we'll continue to have to address, and our job is to ... make sure that we maintain a community that's comfortable for everyone who's living in it. Not just those who are upset about the noise but those who are riding in their cars."



This Norsonic device can determine how much noise a crowd or nightclub makes.

► Cracking down on noise, 1A

Hey, suburbanites: Keep it down!

Smaller cities, towns pass laws to stop noise

By Charisse Jones
USA TODAY

Dozens of communities across the country are cracking down on booming car stereos, whirring weed trimmers and other sounds that disrupt the quiet of suburbia.

Many suburbs and small towns, faced with a problem they long thought was limited to the nation's largest cities, are setting new noise limits, adding sources of noise to the regulations and increasing fines to restore a sense of tranquility to their enclaves. Among the tightened restrictions:

► Since June, drivers in Boulder, Colo., risk getting a summons if the music from their car stereo is audible more than a car-length away. A person yelling after 11 p.m. on public property in a residential neighborhood also can be cited.

► Portsmouth, N.H., no longer allows amplified music in the town square. The city also requires motorcycles to stay below certain noise levels.

► Police last month began enforcing new noise limits in Tampa's

Peaceful to ear-piercing

Noise levels (in decibels):

| | |
|----------------------------|--------|
| Quiet residential area | 40 |
| Power lawn mower | 65-95 |
| Freeway traffic | 70 |
| Subway | 90-115 |
| Motorcycle | 95-110 |
| Boom box | 100 |
| Leafblower, car horn | 110 |
| Chain saw, ambulance siren | 120 |

Note: Long-term exposure to noise above 85 decibels can cause hearing loss.
Source: League for the Hard of Hearing

By Karl Gelles, USA TODAY

Finding peace, quiet isn't easy in the 'burbs, 3A

Ybor City entertainment district, where noise from nightclubs and other businesses has disturbed nearby residents.

"Cities have been noisy for a long time," says Les Blomberg, executive director of the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse in Montpelier, Vt., which supports efforts to re-

duce noise. "What's changed is ... we've brought the noise with us to the suburbs, and the people who have moved away (from cities) are running out of options. And so they're starting to advocate for better noise ordinances."

Even New York, the city famous for never slumbering, is taking steps to make it easier for residents to sleep. In June, the City Council began considering an overhaul of a 3-decade-old noise ordinance. Among the proposed revisions: a limit to how long dogs can continuously bark near residences — 10 minutes for most of the day, 5 minutes after 10 p.m.

Some worry that local crack-downs aren't applied fairly.

"We don't have a problem with people passing noise ordinances as long as they target all sources of noise," says Bill Wood, managing editor of *American Motorcyclist* magazine, who says several cities have passed rules aimed at motorcycle riders.

But many civic leaders feel that the rules are essential to maintaining a decent quality of life.

"People expect to go to bed at night," says Evelyn Sirrell, mayor of Portsmouth. "You can't blame them."