



June 27, 2025

The Honorable Takis Karantonis
Chair, Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

RE: Moving Forward with a Gas-Powered Leaf Blower Ban

Dear Chair Karantonis and members of the County Board:

Sierra Club's Potomac River Group, EcoAction Arlington, and Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions Arlington Hub request that you work with staff and stakeholders to approve, by the end of 2025 if possible, a gas-powered leaf blower ban similar to the one recently passed by the City of Alexandria. We stand ready to assist, as needed, with research, public education and more.

Scores of other jurisdictions already have successfully banned gas-powered leaf blowers (GLBs). The long list includes many local peers, including, in addition to Alexandria, Washington, DC, Montgomery County, Takoma Park, Chevy Chase, and Annapolis.ⁱ

GLBs have long been a serious noise, worker health, public health, climate change and environmental concern in Arlington. Arlington's authority to regulate noise is undisputed and the uniquely harmful nature of GLB noise is now well-documented. We believe it is time to protect all Arlingtonians, including landscape workers, who are most exposed to these harmful impacts.

Noise from GLBs is more than a nuisance. It is a serious form of pollution that damages human health and well-being.ⁱⁱ The volume, or decibel level, of GLBs is uniformly higher than allowed by the Arlington County noise ordinance in residential neighborhoods.ⁱⁱⁱ While that is reason enough to prohibit their use, GLBs also emit noise at a lower frequency than electric leaf blowers. GLB noise carries farther and penetrates buildings more readily, creating much more harm than the volume alone might suggest.^{iv}

People subjected to excessive noise have higher stress hormones and higher blood pressure. The literature shows a clear association between noise levels and aggression, conflict and other serious mental health impacts.^v GLB noise regularly disrupts the sleep of children, shift workers, the elderly and others who require daytime sleep.

Scores of localities have banned GLBs based on noise pollution alone.^{vi} However due to their primitive 2-stroke engine design, GLBs emit shockingly high amounts of carbon and other environmental pollutants that harm public health and add to our climate change challenges:

- The California Air Resources Board calculated that using a leaf blower for 1 hour “emits smog-forming pollution comparable to driving a new light-duty passenger car about 1,100 miles – about the distance from Los Angeles to Denver.”^{vii}
- The Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai reports that “GLB emissions include carbon monoxide, formaldehyde, benzene, nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, and particulate matter. In addition to impacting respiratory health and increasing asthma risk and severity, these pollutants are associated with numerous health outcomes, including autism, cancer, heart disease, and dementia.”^{viii}

Despite the harms caused by GLBs the County’s past legal interpretation held that Arlington was powerless to act due to a legal Catch-22: It was thought to be only permissible under state law to enforce the noise ordinance using decibel readings on a case-by-case basis, but it was not possible to do so in practice due to challenging evidentiary requirements.

This “Catch-22” was addressed in an Opinion Letter issued by Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares in August 2024 to the City of Alexandria.^{ix} The Attorney General pointed out that under Virginia law, when jurisdictions are granted authority to act (e.g., to enforce a noise ordinance) without specific direction regarding the method of implementation, the local government will be upheld “as long as the method selected is reasonable.”^x The Attorney General went on to find that it would be reasonable for Alexandria to “amend its noise control ordinances to prohibit the use of gas-powered leaf blowers while continuing to allow the use of electric-powered leaf blowers.”^{xi} The Attorney General’s letter, and the precedent set by Alexandria, opens the door for Arlington to move forward. The facts and relevant legal authority in Arlington and Alexandria are virtually identical, and the reasoning of the Opinion Letter is broad.

We consider Alexandria’s 18-month phase in period reasonable and support additional efforts to ease the transition for local landscaping companies and homeowners through outreach, training and rebate programs. We understand that electric leaf blowers cost more up-front than GLBs. However, shifting to electric leaf blowers becomes cash-positive quickly as savings in fuel and maintenance add up. Montgomery County estimates that the return on investment in our region turns positive in 2.5 to 3 years.^{xii}

We look forward to discussing these issues in greater detail at any time.

Sincerely,

Elenor Hodges
Executive Director, EcoAction Arlington

Julie Rosenberg
Leader, Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions, Arlington Hub

Dean Amel
Chair, Sierra Club – Potomac River Group

cc: Mark Schwartz, County Manager
Jennifer Fioretti, Assistant County Manager for Climate Policy
Jason Papacosma, Chief, Office of Sustainability and Environmental Management

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ “Interactive Map of Lawn Mower and Leaf Blower Policies,” U.S. PIRG Education Fund, updated as of June 2025, available at <https://pirg.org/edfund/resources/interactive-map-of-lawn-mower-and-leaf-blower-policies/>.

ⁱⁱ See, e.g., “Gas Leaf Blowers are Health Hazards,” Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, Institute for Exposomic Research, July 22, 2024, available at <https://mountsinaiexposomics.org/gas-leaf-blowers-are-health-hazards/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Noise Control Ordinance of Arlington County, Chapter 15 of the County Code, establishes 60 decibels as the maximum continuous noise permitted in residential areas during daytime (Table 1). We are not aware of any GLB model rated by its manufacturer at or below 60 decibels.

^{iv} See, e.g., Erica Walker and Jamie L. Banks, “Characteristics of Lawn and Garden Equipment Sound: A Community Pilot Study,” *Journal of Environmental and Toxicological Studies*, 2017, available at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6707732/>.

^v See, e.g., Lisa Goines, RN, Louis Hagler, MD, “Noise Pollution: A Modern Plague,” *Southern Medical Journal*, March, 2007, available at <https://sma.org/southern-medical-journal/article/noise-pollution-a-modern-plague/>.

^{vi} “Interactive Map of Lawn Mower and Leaf Blower Policies,” U.S. PIRG Education Fund, updated as of June 2025, available at <https://pirg.org/edfund/resources/interactive-map-of-lawn-mower-and-leaf-blower-policies/>.

^{vii} California Air Resources Board, “Small Engine Fact Sheet,” December 15, 2021, available at: <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/fact-sheets/sore-small-engine-fact-sheet>

^{viii} Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, Institute for Exposomic Research, “Gas Leaf Blowers are Health Hazards,” July 22, 2024, available at: <https://mountsinaiexposomics.org/gas-leaf-blowers-are-health-hazards/>

^{ix} Office of the Attorney General, Official Opinions, Opinion #24-018, August 12, 2024 (“Miyares Letter”), available at <https://oag.state.va.us>.

^x Miyares Letter, p. 2.

^{xi} Miyares Letter, p. 3.

^{xii} Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection, “Electric vs. Gas-powered Leaf Blowers: Myths and Facts,” available at <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/DEP/property-care/leaf-blowers/electric-leaf-blowers.html>