

MODERATOR'S COMMITTEE ON LEAF BLOWERS
March 21, 2016 Minutes

The Moderator's Committee on Leaf Blowers held a meeting on March 21, 2016 from 8:10am - 10:00am in room 408 of Town Hall. Present were committee members John Doggett, Dennis Doughty, Neil Gordon, Faith Michaels, and Maura Toomey.

By a vote of 5-0-0, the minutes for the January 11th meeting were approved.

By a vote of 5-0-0, the minutes for the February 29th Public Hearing, as amended to include additional identifying characteristics for some attendees (specifically Dennis DeWitt and Nancy O'Connor), were approved.

The Committee reviewed the data from the leaf blower survey. There were 1312 responses with over 3,600 comments which is quite remarkable for a Town survey. With help from Ben Vivante, IP addresses of survey participants were reviewed and the vast majority were legitimate Brookline IP addresses. Still, it was noted that the survey was not scientific, that is its results cannot be validly projected to represent an opinion for all Brookline residents, but represents just the opinions of the respondents.

The Committee was struck by the quality and quantity of free-form comments in the survey responses. The Survey data responses were identified by Precinct and an analysis of all survey questions was presented to the Committee of some 1025 respondents.

Some observations from the survey:

- A large percentage of the survey respondents (who were presumably informed about this issue and self-selecting) reported of being aware of the existing restrictions on leaf blowers in the Town.
- A majority of respondents were in their home more than 4 hours a day
- Noise was considered as having the largest impact on respondents
- A majority of survey respondents thought that an education campaign would improve the situation.
- A majority of respondents were not in favor of a gas-powered leaf blower ban
- Over 40% of respondents thought there should be no exemptions to the regulations
- About half of the respondents were satisfied with the current regulations about half were dissatisfied
- A majority of respondents were not in favor of additional restrictions on leaf blowers

In the free-form comments there were a number of explicit complaints about the Town, and the Committee discussed the question of whether the Town has abused its position. (Several Committee members felt it had.) It was pointed out that only the City of Palo Alto, had been identified, so far, as a city/town that subjected itself to the same restrictions as residents.

During discussion, several questions were raised about the correlations between answers. Specifically whether it's possible to identify those respondents who are just reflexively pro or con.

Based on the Survey respondents, it appears that respondents in the “leafier” precincts in Town were more favorable to leaf blowers than those in less “leafier” neighborhoods. This led to a discussion about whether it would be reasonable for the Town to have different rules for different neighborhoods. No agreement was reached, but it was pointed out that "one-size-fits-all" rules could still have the effect of discriminating by neighborhood. For example, a uniform rule that restricted leaf blower operation to be a certain distance from the property line would have different implications for large lots vs. smaller ones. Or the number of leaf blowers allowed to operate within a certain physical area could have a similar effect.

The Committee then discussed the feedback from the Public Hearing. There was wide agreement that the testimony was high quality, including rational and respectful discussion. The landscaping community in particular should be congratulated.

It was agreed that the most consistent comment received during testimony was the sense that homeowners should be held responsible along with landscapers for any abuse of the regulations.

No votes were taken on either the survey or the public hearing.

A tentative schedule for upcoming meetings was proposed, along with a list of entities that should be invited to those meeting, including the Town, Town Counsel, the Health Department, someone from enforcement (Police and/or DPW).

The discussion concerning what Other Cities and Towns are doing concerning leaf blowers was held over to the next meeting.

Documents Reviewed:

Survey data analysis provided by Survey Monkey

Survey data analysis by precinct