

LINCOLN BOARD OF HEALTH ADVISORY ON LEAF BLOWERS [DECEMBER 10, 2014]

The Board of Health has reviewed the health risks of leaf blowers, which are of public concern because of volatile particulate pollution as well as concentrated high-decibel noise exposure. The Board is strongly supportive of mitigating those risks in Lincoln wherever appropriate. Nevertheless, the intensity of exposure and risk appears to vary widely within our community, greatly complicating any contemplated regulatory approach.

After several meetings with the Lincoln Leaf Blower Study Committee, we observe that the most concentrated and potentially harmful exposures from dust and noise generated by leaf blowers occur in the business center of town along both sides of Lincoln Road north and south of the railroad station (Lincoln zoning districts B1, B2, R2 and R4 that encompass the various Lincoln Mall businesses, Lincoln Woods housing, and Cambridge Trust Bank, among others), to be referred to as “the Business Center,” because this area contains many commercial and rental properties with large expanses of asphalt in parking lots and interior streets as well as extensive paved walkways.

The evidence we reviewed suggests strongly that use of leaf blowers on such solid surfaces raises the largest clouds of dangerous particulates. In addition, the close proximity of multiple commercial entities in the Business Center that are maintained by different vendors means that residents of and visitors to the center are at risk for such particulate clouds, with accompanying loud and persistent machine noise, on many if not all days of the week in non-winter months, at levels that may be deleterious to their health.

By contrast, the board is much less clear that the use of leaf blowers in other areas of our town presents consistent or even frequent bystander health risks from noise or air pollution.

Therefore, in an effort to mitigate the actual noise and particulate problems in our town Business Center, without resorting to regulations that will be difficult to construct, implement, and monitor, we suggest two steps be considered by appropriate Town of Lincoln departments and the Leaf Blower Study Committee:

1. Explore and define technology alternatives to backpack or rolling leaf blowers to be used for cleaning the asphalt parking, street and sidewalk surfaces in the Business Center in order to minimize airborne particulates that may affect those properties and contiguous private homes. These alternatives would be presented to, negotiated with, and implemented by the various commercial maintenance companies.
 - Alternatives to blowers could include brush or vacuum machinery. As one example, Tennant Co. Green Machine industrial sweepers represent commercially available machines likely suitable for this purpose. We expect the maintenance companies are or could become knowledgeable in many practical alternatives.
2. Coordinate one or at most two half-days for surface cleaning in the Business Center, so that whatever noise is inevitably required for cleaning of green and asphalt surfaces will be limited to those times, which should be a commercially viable constraint for the town DPW and other private maintenance companies.
 - Such coordinated time and day constraints (such as Tuesday mornings and Thursday afternoons) might well be implemented by the town by negotiation with the maintenance companies.

The Board of Health suggests these specifics as a practical, effective and expeditious approach (which may be able to be negotiated with affected parties and not require formal regulation) to the serious problem of noise and particulate exposure from leaf blowers in the town Business Center. The Board of Health stands ready to consider regulations to mitigate leaf blower particulate and noise health risks in the Business Center if recommended limited and voluntary approaches are ineffective or unattainable.