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The Sound and the Infuriated

Outdoor Noises Drive Some Neighbors Crazy

By Rebecca R. Kahlenberg
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Alexandria resident Susan Davis lives under a flight path for Reagan National Airport, but it's not the noise from the sky that bothers her.

Last fall, she was frequently unable to chat on the phone because of the roar when a lawn company used leaf blowers next door. "I couldn't even hear myself talk," she said.

Several times, she was awoken by nearby car alarms. "They don't serve any purpose other than disturbing the peace because they are ignored by everyone," she said.

Amid all that clamor, she said, "I wanted my sanity back."

It's the time of year when routine neighborhood noise can make you crazy. Fall is on the way and homeowners will be turning down the air conditioning, opening windows and spending time on their porches and decks or in their gardens. But sometimes, the din from a neighbor's property -- be it a barking dog, car alarm, outdoor stereo, renovation crew, power lawn tool or revved up motorcycle -- can ruin time spent outdoors.

"People forget that noise is not contained by picket fences," said P. M. Forni, co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project and author of "Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct" (St. Martin's Press, 2002).

In a region where many residents hear an almost constant hum from the Beltway or rumble from airplanes, it may seem surprising that ground-level neighborhood noise could be so upsetting. But noise experts point to several explanations.

Cora Jordan, author of "Neighbor Law: Fences, Trees, Boundaries & Noise" (Nolo, 2001), blames rising stress levels in our society for our sensitivity to noise at home. Suburban commuters spend increasing amounts of time on traffic-filled roads, and office workers downtown who hear fire engines and jackhammers during the day "have had enough -- they want it quiet when they come home."

Amy K. Boyle, director of public education at the League for the Hard of Hearing in New York, says some people worry not only about losing peace and quiet, but also about losing their hearing. A 2000 League study of people between the ages of 60 and 89 found that significantly more people failed hearing screenings in 2000 than in 1980 or 1990. Noise of more than 85 decibels can, over time, cause permanent hearing problems; many outdoor power tools, such as drills and leaf blowers, can exceed those levels at close distances, Boyle said.

Some industries are working to improve technology to manufacture quieter products. "We are aware of homeowners' concern about noise levels," said Mary Leonard, communications manager at Deere & Co., a Illinois company that makes John Deere brand residential, commercial and agricultural equipment. Leonard

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said that while the United States has no national noise regulations, the European Union does, and her company strives to meet those.

Still, she said creating quieter motors is "an engineering challenge."

Lee Edmunds, manager of motorcycle press for American Honda, said Honda encourages riders to respect local noise ordinances. "We produce a lot of toys, so we want to make sure people can enjoy them without annoying others," he said.

Residents seeking respite from noise in their neighborhoods won't get help from federal or state governments -- noise enforcement at those levels was cut decades ago. Local governments, however, can quiet things down.

In some locales, including Boulder, Colo.; Portsmouth, N.H.; and Tampa, noise restrictions have been tightened recently, according to an article last month in USA Today. In some parts of California, officials have banned leaf blowers. Similar actions do not appear to be taking place in the Washington region, but every jurisdiction has noise ordinances that restrict construction and other noisy activity to certain weekday and weekend hours and impose fines on violators.

Yet officials say few residents end up paying for making noise. In Montgomery County, for example, where there are 500 to 600 noise complaints annually, only about 30 civil citations are issued, with a maximum fine of \$500, said Tom Ogle, noise-control program director in the county's Department of Environmental Protection. Investigators resolve most cases by looking into the matter or issuing a warning letter.

Ditto in Fairfax County, which receives about 180 noise complaints per year. "There's a good compliance rate once someone knows they're in violation," said Michael R. Congleton, deputy zoning administrator of Fairfax's Zoning Enforcement Branch.

For those such as Alexandria's Davis, who would like to see stricter noise ordinances, forming or joining an anti-noise activist group may be the answer. Grass-roots groups of residents can motivate a jurisdiction to move on noise matters because rarely do city or county governments review noise codes or adopt stricter regulations without citizen prodding, said Eric M. Zwerling, director of the Rutgers University Noise Technical Assistance Center in New Jersey and president of the Noise Consultancy.

Davis joined such a group -- Noise Free America -- after her neighbor's lawn company refused to use a rake and broom instead of a leaf blower, and after she found no ordinances on the City of Alexandria Web site that would help. "I know the problems are resolvable," she said.

Noise Free America has 43 local chapters in 25 states, director Ted Rueter said. It is one of several national or international organizations that attempt to reduce noise through education and advocacy. The Noise Pollution Clearinghouse in Vermont and Right to Quiet Society, in Vancouver, B.C., have similar agendas. The Noise Center at the League for the Hard of Hearing, has an anti-noise mission with a primary focus on hearing conservation.

Besides joining anti-noise groups, those who long for a quiet neighborhood can call the police, use mediation, or even take a neighbor to court. But experts say many noise issues can be resolved more easily through neighbor-to-neighbor communication.

Jordan, the author of Neighbor Law, recommends keeping a list of incidences when a neighbor's noise is bothersome, including the dates and times. Then approach the neighbor in person or by letter, and politely explain the problem.

Civility expert Forni suggests taking a preventive strategy by treating neighbors the way you would like to be treated. Approach them before you or someone you hire uses loud power tools or begins renovation work and before you have a party with loud music. Alert them to the times they should expect noise. If you do so, "chances are they'll want to be more considerate of you when they make noise," Forni said.

Les Blomberg, director of the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse, says that is the approach one of his neighbors in Vermont has taken. The neighbor is a musician who occasionally has parties where the music violates local ordinances, but "the cops never come because he always tells me in advance and lets me know that if there is a problem he will fix it," Blomberg said.

Of course, there's another strategy: Wait out the situation until winter. By then windows will be closed and most people will spend time at home indoors, at a safe distance from noisy neighbors.

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