

Considerations Around Municipal Leaf Blower Bans and Ordinances

American Green Zone Alliance is dedicated to sustainable grounds maintenance, including quieter, healthier operations for workers, the communities, local air quality, and the global climate. To that end, we have spent years researching, testing, approving, and lobbying for equipment and common-sense practices that are quieter and safer, with zero emissions, zero gas, zero oil, and far smaller waste streams — all while allowing grounds keepers to perform their daily workload at commercial production rates, with pleasing aesthetics, and at reasonable price points.

AGZA is intimately familiar with the many leaf blower debates that have been raised across the country over the last decade. In fact, this issue was part of the reason our company was founded. We recognize that there are very legitimate concerns about the noise, emissions, airborne dust and particulate matter inseparable from gas leaf blowers, and it is understandable that some communities would want to ban all blowers outright.

But it is important to consider the entire groundskeeping picture when deciding how to react to leaf blower debates.

First, let's start with the notorious noise. Typical gas machines have noise levels between 75dB(A) and 95dB(A), with some gas chain saws as loud as 120dB(A). Meanwhile most electric tools are between 65dB(A) and 75dB(A), with one leaf blower as quiet as 56dB(A). But the noise differences between gas and electric are much more dramatic than these numbers might suggest, because the Decibel (dB) scale for loudness is logarithmic not linear. That means the noise level accelerates up an exponential curve, with each increase of 10dB being twice as loud as the previous. For example, a typical 85dB(A) gas leaf blower is four times louder — and therefore four times more obnoxious to the public and four times more hazardous to the operator's ear — than an average 65dB electric leaf blower. And since the workday safety threshold for unprotected ears has been set at 85dB(A) by OSHA, at 80dB(A) by NIOSH and ANSI, and at just 75dB(A) by the EPA, switching from gas to electric literally makes all the difference.

Second, most commercial lawn and garden operators insist that rakes and brooms are not a viable option for all settings. They claim imposing outright blower bans will inevitably reduce work production and increase time and cost for the same aesthetic. AGZA has spent years with commercial crews and we can corroborate the concerns of the workers. Despite a few online side-by-side video demonstrations that try to show a rake or broom is just as fast as a blower, these circumstantial tests are conducted for a single task on a flat patch of grass or smooth sidewalk. Commercial operators need to expediently cover many acres of property every day, five or six days a week, season after season. In many settings it is difficult or impossible with rakes and brooms to achieve the same results as with blowers — most notably in complex landscaped yards and terraces, behind bushes, within delicate planter beds, and on unsweepable surfaces like gravel or wood chips.

Third, all particulate matter are not the same. Yes, the powerful high-speed air blasting from gas and electric blowers both stir up fine debris from the ground and leaves (dust, pollen, mold, fecal matter, fertilizers, pesticides, and other irritants). But only gas combustion blower engines generate their own toxic clouds of hydrocarbon PM2.5 — microscopic carcinogenic molecules that are among the most dangerous particulates of all. In this regard the notorious 2-stroke gas leaf blowers, string trimmers, hedge trimmers, edgers, pole saws and chain saws are the worst offenders. These poisonous gas fuel elements are so small they are inhaled deeply into the lungs and can pass directly into the blood stream. By stark contrast, battery-powered electric leaf blower motors generate absolutely zero emissions and therefore zero hydrocarbon PM2.5. Further, AGZA Service Professional Accreditation educates and trains crews to take advantage of the more sensitive throttling of electric tools, optimizing air flow for a given task and minimizing overall airborne particulates.

Fourth, even a complete ban on gas blowers won't mitigate the noise and gas pollution from all the other gas engines that remain in the groundskeeper's toolset: mowers, trimmers, hedgers, edgers, saws, etc. Gas blowers may be the most egregious offenders, but the others are not far behind. Banning one gas engine will simply shift the arguments to the next.

Finally, in defense of your lawn and garden worker: AGZA comes from the groundskeeping industry and our mission includes ensuring that workers not only have tool choices that create a safer, healthier work environment for themselves, but that communities recognize and honor the important work they do every day to make our green spaces beautiful and healthy. Heavy-handed bans are even heavier to the workers, who typically labor for low wages, with little or no benefits or leverage over their own working conditions.

So what's the best answer?

AGZA has invested a great deal of time, thought, and effort in helping communities and grounds maintenance operators strike the best balance. The solution that provides the most positive results for the broadest audience is a well-trained operator using quality battery electric equipment.

The new breed of commercial-grade battery electric leaf blowers gives operators near-gas-like performance (power, speed, torque, weight, and run-times) while operating at about half the noise level. Furthermore, their electronic throttle controls and turbo modes empower well-trained operators to blow at lower speeds, and rely only momentarily on power boosts when necessary. Not only does this further reduce the already lower sound levels, it means less airborne dust and particulate matter.

With all the promise of battery electrics in mind, it's worth mentioning that AGZA always recommends workers use the tool with the least environmental and health impact that can efficiently and effectively service the task at hand. We're enthusiastic fans of rakes and brooms to collect modest areas of light clippings, or to dislodge a heavy patch of wet leaves, or to clean dry debris on smooth surfaces.

In conclusion, we enthusiastically endorse commercial-quality battery-electric equipment, plus manual tools, as the cornerstone of enlightened and sustainable lawn and garden maintenance. Therefore, AGZA strongly encourages communities that are contemplating a total ban on all powered leaf blowers — gas and electric — to instead consider allowing low-noise zero-emission commercial-grade battery-electric blowers (as well as their corresponding electric mowers, trimmers, edgers, saws, etc).

The best tools by the top manufacturers are truly incredible; they need to be seen and heard to be believed. Electric tools dramatically reduce noise levels, they address virtually all the health and environmental hazards inherent to gas equipment, and they empower crews to continue to do a professional quality job at profitable work production rates.

Thank you for your consideration,



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