

Report to the Palm Springs Sustainability Commission Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Leaf Blowers

Date of Subcommittee Meeting: October 26, 2016
Members: Roy Clark, Jen Futterman, Joe Jackson

Bottom Line Up Front. The Leaf Blower Subcommittee recommends that the City of Palm Springs immediately start to phase out gas powered leaf blowers and eliminate them in all areas/zoning of the City by December 31, 2018. The two-year phase-out period will include testing battery powered blowers and other maintenance equipment by City employees and contractors and an exchange program for gardener/landscaper-owned gas powered leaf blowers.

Background. On June 23, 2016, the Palm Springs City Council directed staff and the Sustainability Commission “to continue to conduct studies and develop options for the reductions and/or elimination of gas powered leaf blowers including grant or incentive options, educational components, health protection for workers, and a potential phased-in regulations.” At the regular Sustainability Commission meeting, July 19, 2016, an ad hoc subcommittee was appointed. It is comprised of members of the Health and Wellness Subcommittee and the Outreach Subcommittee.

Over the summer months, the ad hoc subcommittee reviewed data from prior work of the Sustainability Commission in 2012-13 and 2015-16; staff reports, which included research on action by other California cities; ONE-PS Ecology Committee minutes; leaf blower manufacturer noise and emission specifications; and South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) communications.

A public study session was set for October 24, 2016. Postcards were sent to all applicable licensed gardening/landscaping business owners and community organizations. On-line notices were sent through the City website, ONE-PS, Nextdoor, Facebook, and other social media outlets. The *Desert Sun* printed an invitation to the study session on the Opinion Page, October 21. People were also invited to submit comments in writing to city staff and the Commission chair.

Approximately 28 people attended the study session and 13 people spoke in public comment. Translation into Spanish was available at the meeting. Over 65 emails were received in advance of the meeting, as well as many other messages through social media. The subcommittee reviewed all of these comments. The responses were approximately 70% for some sort of ban of leaf blowers.

Subcommittee Recommendations. Based on all the information we have reviewed to this time, the members of the ad hoc subcommittee are in consensus on these statements:

1. Gas powered leaf blowers should be phased out in the City of Palm Springs. Corded electric blowers and vacuums, rakes, and brooms are options for maintenance in settings such as individual yards. Battery powered blowers may be a solution for

maintenance in larger settings such as City, HOA, and commercial properties. Current battery technology may not be sufficiently advanced at this time to provide a viable solution in larger settings or in environments with temperatures above 100 degrees, which we experience in the City about one-third of the year. Lithium-ion batteries used in some blowers are advertised as capable of keeping their charge up to 5 hours. However, additional testing of battery-powered blowers in the real settings and environments of Palm Springs is necessary before they can be widely adopted. The testing will show how long batteries keep their charge in practice and how well they operate at high temperatures.

2. The City of Palm Springs can show leadership as a “sustainable city” by testing battery-powered blowers and other maintenance equipment on City property. The City staff and contractors can obtain equipment through a pilot project with the SCAQMD and/or purchase battery powered equipment so that City employees and contractors can demonstrate how to clean City parks, medians, and streets and other properties without gas powered blowers. We commend City staff for already pursuing a pilot project with the SCAQMD. We recommend follow-through by Facilities management on this pilot project and funding by City Council to purchase current state-of-the-art equipment as needed and more capable equipment as it becomes available.
3. We expect that after two years of testing and demonstration, acceptable equipment options and operating procedures for maintaining individual yards and City, HOA, and commercial properties will be identified. Therefore, we recommend that the City eliminate gas powered blowers in all areas/zoning of Palm Springs by December 31, 2018. We believe this to be in the best interest of the health and well-being of all of our residents.
4. We recommend that the City and the Sustainability Commission should begin an immediate exchange program for gardener/landscaper-owned gas powered leaf blowers, especially for the less efficient and higher-polluting leaf blowers with 2-stroke engines. This program could be in partnership with the SCAQMD, CVAG, and other regional bodies, and perhaps with City grant assistance for more robust funding. Our preference is that a special price could be available for battery or corded equipment when a gas-powered blower is returned.
5. Training of professional gardeners and landscapers on the use of leaf blowers (whether gas or electric) is currently required of gardening/landscaping business owners at the time of their City license renewal. We believe that the current requirement for training just one representative or supervisor from each business is not sufficient for a thorough communication of proper leaf blower use and safety. City contractors have demonstrated that proper training can minimize noise, dust emissions, and the oft-cited problem of just “blowing debris from one place to another”. We recommend that all employees in a business get appropriate training on leaf blower use, including how to collect green waste in one place and use rakes and brooms to clean it up and dispose of it. A possible medium for this training is an independently produced bi-lingual video. It is recognized that employee turnover in

gardening/landscaping businesses will provide a challenge to consistently applying the training.

6. Finally, we have rejected, at this point, possible restrictions on leaf blowers by noise/decibel level, emissions levels, or by hours or days of the week, or by zoning. Many people expressed concern regarding including unenforceable or half-measures in our recommendations, which we believe would be the case by implementing restrictions. We recognize the ability of any homeowner, HOA, or business to move forward at any time with other solutions, which we commend and encourage. It would be helpful if residents could also adjust their expectations for “perfection” in landscape maintenance as we move forward in this transition.

We wish to acknowledge that many in our city have responded heartily to the drought by eliminating unnecessary and water-thirsty turf. A relevant metric from the Desert Water Agency is that about one million square feet of turf were removed (and replaced with desert landscape) in Palm Springs in 2014-15 and 2015-16 rebate programs. This represents over 500 projects. As many people have written, this conservation movement toward new desert landscape, which is difficult to clean without some kind of blower, means leaf blower use is more necessary now than when maintaining turf. This acknowledgment strongly influenced our recommendation. Were it practical to eliminate all leaf blowers due to health concerns, we would recommend it.

As an ad hoc subcommittee, we move this report for approval by the Sustainability Commission, to be forwarded to the City Council with supporting staff reports as required.