

Stop the Pollution

by Barbara Joy Cooley, Environment Committee chairperson for COTI

Prior to 2019, the City of Sanibel's code allowed leaf blowers and other lawn equipment to be operated seven days a week, from 8AM to 9PM. The code does not limit noise from leaf blowers; it merely requires that leaf blowers have mufflers. The Sanibel code does *not* address problems of pollution from leaf blower use at all.

In March 2019, Committee of the Islands (COTI) issued a position statement urging the city council to prohibit the use of gas-powered leaf blowers and to further restrict hours during which electric leaf blowers may be used (e.g., 8AM to 7PM, Monday through Saturday).

The council discussed the issue several times in 2019, ultimately deciding in December of that year to merely further reduce the hours during which vegetation contractors may use gas-powered leaf blowers to 9AM to 4:30PM, Monday through Saturday. The council decided not to ban gas-powered leaf blowers at that time, meaning that nothing was done about the pollution caused by these devices.

Significant Polluters of the Air

As COTI representatives stated before the council more than once in 2019, that pollution is significant. The emissions from gas-powered lawn equipment include high levels of benzene, butadiene, formaldehyde and fine particulates – all of which are health risks.¹ The workers who use this equipment are the most at risk.

According to the California Air Resources Board, operating the best-selling commercial gas-powered leaf blower for an hour emits air pollutants comparable to driving a 2017 Toyota Camry about 1100 miles. Small gas engines, such as those used in many leaf blowers, contribute ozone-damaging pollutants that are projected to exceed those same emissions from vehicles by sometime in this decade.²

Many other communities in Florida and across the nation have banned the use of gas-powered leaf blowers. Sanibel citizens take pride in protecting the environment, and it is time for this City to address this pollution problem.

City Council, SCCF, and COTI Take Action

Following the Sanibel city council election this past spring, city council members – with Councilman Mike Miller taking the lead – asked the City Attorney to draft a proposed ordinance that would ban the use of gas-powered leaf blowers by January 2023, giving vegetation contractors time to replace their equipment. That draft was discussed at the June council meeting. It was on the agenda for a first reading on July 20, and now is slated for a second reading and possible vote at the August 24 meeting. (Note: there is no public comment at first readings.)

COTI supports the proposed ban. Together with the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, COTI co-sponsored a workshop for vegetation contractors presented by the American Green Zone Alliance in early June. That workshop was an opportunity for the contractors to try out electric leaf blowers and other battery-powered lawn equipment.

Sanibel citizens have spoken out loudly and repeatedly in favor of banning gas-powered leaf blowers. It is time, once more, for them to voice their views about these devices. Comments can be addressed to sancouncil@mysanibel.com, with a copy to coti@coti.org.

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¹National Emissions from Lawn and Garden Equipment, US Environmental Protection Agency, Region 1, September 2015, Jamie L Banks, Robert McConnell. <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-09/documents/banks.pdf>

² California Air Resources Board https://ww3.arb.ca.gov/msprog/offroad/sm_en_fs.pdf