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What It Takes to Defeat the Leaf Blowers

To end the use of gas-powered blowers, advocates in one New Jersey town focused on public health and made their case directly to local elected leaders.



Local tensions over gas-powered leaf blowers are a rite of autumn in many US cities. *Photographer: valentina/iStockphoto via Getty Images*

By Jessica Stolzberg
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Takeaways by Bloomberg AI

- A father in Montclair, New Jersey, measured carbon monoxide levels near gas-powered leaf blowers and found them to be higher than the federal ambient air quality standard.
- The use of gas-powered leaf blowers poses health threats, including the release of carcinogens and low-frequency noise that can cause hearing

impairment, prompting some towns and cities to enact local regulations to limit or end their use.

- A growing number of municipalities are banning gas-powered leaf blowers, with some citing the success of electric equipment and the need to prioritize public health over industry concerns about the cost of switching to new technology.

In February 2023, a father stood before the mayor and town councilors during public comment at a municipal meeting in Montclair, New Jersey.

“What is the threshold of danger?” he asked into the microphone.

He went on to explain how he’d recently stood on the sidewalk and measured the carbon monoxide levels in the air using a hand-held meter as a crew across the street from his home operated several gas-powered leaf blowers. The reading – 39 parts per million – was higher than the federal ambient air quality standard, which is 35 parts per million over one hour, not to be exceeded more than once a year.

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He kept his two young children inside.

The hazardous use of the gas leaf blower has been talked and written about for decades, as if on a loop. It lights up community forums more than property taxes, school budgets and local scandals. Celebrities go viral in their venom. Some may find a comic dimension to this discourse, but the health threats of this machine are no joke.

The two-stroke internal combustion engines used in most gas leaf blowers make them far more polluting than those in automobiles: They release up to

30% of their fuel mixture unburned, along with carcinogens like benzene, formaldehyde and butadiene. The low-frequency, high-decibel noise they generate can strip the hairlike cells of the inner ear, never to regenerate, and penetrate buildings even from a distance. Safety manuals for new gas-powered blowers warn of the risk of hearing impairment as well as “toxic exhaust fumes ... known to cause respiratory problems, cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive harm.” Users are instructed not to operate the machines within 50 feet of bystanders. The Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai dedicates a webpage to the health hazards of gas leaf blowers, especially to children and to workers who must operate them daily.

A growing number of towns and cities across the US are enacting local regulations that end or limit the use of gas-powered leaf blowers. But the \$188 billion US landscaping industry and its trade associations are pushing back, at the local and state level. Instead of mandatory restrictions on the use of gas blowers, the industry has proposed a “phased transition” to electric equipment. In community meetings and hearings over potential legislation, lawn business owners often say that it’s too expensive to switch to the safer, less-polluting battery-powered models and that their power isn’t sufficient for commercial applications.

Yet the ROI calculators of major manufacturers and reports from landscaping professionals who use electric blowers show otherwise. In July, the trade magazine *Lawn & Landscape* published an article headlined “No More Need to Hesitate” that detailed the advantages of adopting the latest generation of electric equipment, from the low-noise work environment to the ease of use, fuel savings and reduced maintenance that come with going gasoline-free.

Local Actions

Change at the local level is the best path forward to remove this dangerous machine from our communities. In 2023, I organized residents for a campaign to bring an end to gas leaf blowers in Montclair. We were following in the footsteps of advocates like journalist James Fallows, who in 2019 wrote in the *Atlantic* about a small group’s tenacious efforts in Washington, DC. I clung to three of his words: “Showing up matters.”

Did we ever show up.

Most of us had never done something like this. We had no group name, no website, no social media account. We spent no time on petitions or yard signs. Instead, we went directly to town hall and made our case, in person, to our elected leaders. Montclair already had seasonal restrictions that limited gas leaf blower use to the spring and fall months, but we believed our community's health should no longer be governed by a calendar.

Five to 10 people from across the community spoke at 10 consecutive council meetings, taking our allotted three-minute turn at the mic. (It adds up.) We found others and others found us, new faces and voices joining each time, like the father who had measured the carbon monoxide. We worked independently of an established local advocacy group, whose heads told me, despite a shared mission, that it wasn't the right time to push for a full-year ordinance. This taught me that no one organization or commission holds a monopoly on advocacy. Forging a separate path, in fact, can be fruitful.

Read more: [The Leaf Blowers Will Not Go Quietly](#)

In Montclair's town hall, we spoke often of how industry arguments echoed those used in earlier public health campaigns against hazards like indoor smoking and lead paint. In those cases, businesses also warned that new regulations would bring economic damage – until the effects of second-hand smoke and lead poisoning became too grave and obvious to ignore.

We also pointed to the municipalities ahead of us. [Washington, DC](#), and [Larchmont, New York](#), banned gas leaf blowers in 2022. Our neighbor Maplewood, New Jersey, soon followed, then Evanston, Illinois. Irvington, White Plains, and Mamaroneck, New York, came next. This past July, legislation in Maryland's [Montgomery County](#) took full effect. (An entire county!)

At the state level, bills banning gas leaf blowers have been proposed but languish in [New Jersey](#), [New York](#) and [Colorado](#). Illinois' proposed statewide ban [failed in 2025](#). It's clear that municipalities can do more – faster.

In Montclair, our efforts paid off: Five months into our campaign, the council voted to prohibit gas leaf blowers year-round. The ordinance took effect Oct. 15, 2023.

Still, too many locales continue only to contemplate, delay or reject eliminating this public health threat. Last year, Huntington, New York, unanimously passed legislation to phase out the use of gas leaf blowers, but then placed it on indefinite hold. Boulder, Colorado, invested in a two-year study that documented the serious impacts of the gas leaf blower, but then “deferred” all action. Providence, Rhode Island, just passed an ordinance to do nothing until 2028, with full-year restrictions in 2033. The mayor of West Orange, New Jersey, twice vetoed the town council’s passage of a phase-out leading to a full ban, saying that the regulation would be “catastrophic to our golf courses.”

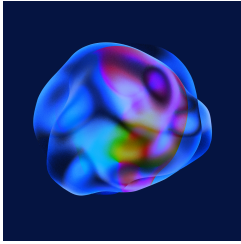
Other municipalities, like Princeton and Millburn, New Jersey, are passing only seasonal restrictions, allowing the machines to operate in fall and spring, for about five to six months of their most intense use. (Advocates refer to this as “prohibiting outdoor ice skating in the summer.”)

Paradigm Shift

The debates in these local efforts to restrict leaf blowers often get hung up on the details of equipment electrification. That’s really a distraction: For generations, yard work was entirely possible without any kind of machine blowing 200 mile-per-hour winds. Even in the US Northeast – famed for its foliage drop – landscaping businesses now comply with ordinances that prohibit the gas leaf blower, employing a combination of methods to get the job done, from electric blowers to mulch mowing to “leaving leaves” to a healthy reacquaintance with the rake.

The leaf-blower takeover reflects “what has been done to the idea of laboring,” says Amelia Cox, who owns the yard care business Monarch Mowing in Baltimore, Maryland. (That city passed a gas leaf blower ban in 2024, but the phase-out will not be complete until 2027.) She recalls working at a client’s property as a landscaping crew of five worked next door. Four gas leaf blowers and 30 minutes later, they were done. The same task by

rake and tarp took her two hours – alone. Of course, says Cox, “nobody hires me to make their place look vacuumed.” (She has a wait list.)



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Traditional landscapers often complain that only gas-powered leaf blowers can provide the pristine “clean” yard their customers demand. But this unnatural aesthetic was introduced by the machine itself, normalizing the erasure of leaves from a landscape never intended to be left so spectacularly without them. And despite industry alarms, there’s no evidence that businesses, small or large, have shuttered because a local ordinance removed the gas leaf blower from their suite of tools. Our town has prevailed twice in federal court in a lawsuit brought by local landscapers who have continued to work here.

This is Montclair’s third fall without gas leaf blowers. The benefits to our community are now blissfully baked in – the inhumane roar, dirty burn and small-particulate spew missed by no one. Our success was born of persistence bolstered by facts, science and sense. Public health should be a mandate, not a research project for officials to ponder, shelve, ignore.

The threshold for danger has been breached.

What can you do? Find out the date of your next municipal meeting. Gather even just a few others who care deeply about this issue. Show up in the room where it happens – again and again and again. And take your time at the mic.

– *Jessica Stolzberg is a writer and freelance editor in Montclair, New Jersey.*

