

Pipe down!

Residents sound off on noise pollution

Newport This Week

[By Tom Shevlin](#)

NEWPORT — More than 60 residents joined in a public forum on Monday night at the Seamen’s Church Institute to voice their concerns over what they say is one of Newport’s most stubborn problems: noise pollution.

From motorcycles and boom cars to leaf blowers and party houses, for many Newport residents, the city is just too loud.

The event, sponsored by the Alliance for a Livable Newport, drew a standing-room-only crowd of concerned residents, city officials and a half-dozen representatives from the Newport Police Department.

Paige Bronk, the city’s planning and zoning director, opened the forum by outlining what the city has been doing to address the city’s often noisy streets.

In 2001, the city put forth a party house and nuisance mitigation plan that included several recommendations to combat noise and zoning violations.

According to the report, in the summer of 2000, the city estimated that there were 151 visitors to Newport for each permanent resident.

That large ratio of visitors to residents was identified as a detrimental influence on the city’s residential neighborhoods. In 2001, the city moved to dampen some of the problematic conditions of the city.

Party houses were its first target.

By stepping up enforcement of the city’s noise ordinance, increasing the fines for noise infractions and beefing up the zoning department with an additional zoning officer, the city has made progress in combating noise violations.

However, “we can, and should, do more” said ALN President Bonnie Watson.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, exposure to daily levels of high noise pollution can result in hearing loss, hypertension, increased blood pressure and headaches. Depression, violence and loss of productivity have also been linked to excessive noise.

Among the most potentially harmful sounds: straight-pipe motorcycles, modified boom cars and leaf blowers. Each falls above the EPA threshold for hearing loss, with the decibel level attached to motorcycles and boom cars akin to the sound of a jet takeoff from 100 feet away.

Not necessarily harmful to one's hearing, but equally vexing for many in the audience is the noise associated with the late night-crowds that emerge from the city's downtown restaurants and bars.

"It may be only for 10 minutes, but I'm woken up every night at 1:30," said Graeme Smith, who lives in the Historic Hill neighborhood. To a rousing applause, he implored police to increase their presence in the area between Thames Street and Bellevue Avenue as revelers seek out their cars or accommodations.

According to the Alliance, solutions to Newport's noise problem can be found but may require cooperation among various interest groups.

One of those partners may be Salve Regina University Dean of Students Gerald R. Willis.

"We want our students to be good neighbors," Dr. Willis said.

Of the roughly 2,000 undergraduate students enrolled at Salve Regina University, Dr. Willis estimates, 800 live off-campus in 200 to 250 housing units.

Over the course of the last several years, Salve officials have begun working closely with the Newport Police Department in an effort to identify and muffle problem off-campus houses.

"Winters are much easier for us," said Lt. William Fitzgerald. Working with Salve officials, police have been able to identify potential problem houses at the beginning of the school year, and have educated the students on both the city's noise ordinance and the university's code of conduct.

Peter Fagan, a Newport resident who described his own five year battle over noise with a neighboring landlord, asked Dr. Willis if the university had given any consideration to "blacklisting" students from renting at known problem properties.

"Once they can't rent to Salve students, they're going to start paying attention," he said.

Dr. Willis responded simply, "I should give you my card."

Lt. Fitzgerald, however cautioned that the problem of rowdy college students cannot be traced solely back to Salve. Rather, he pointed out that there are students from URI, CCRI, Roger Williams who all rent houses in Newport. "It's not just a Salve problem," he said. "They've been a good partner."

Lt. Fitzgerald also pointed to the city's four Community Oriented Police Officers as residents' best liaisons to help mitigate noise-related problems.

The four officers, each assigned to a specific geographic area, make it a point to follow up with complainants regularly and help mediate specific community concerns.

"Communication is key," said Officer Kevin Parsonage, whose beat includes the Fifth Ward.

A recent crackdown on boom cars and straight-pipe motorcycles has also proved successful, Officer Parsonage said. Over time, he said, visitors to Newport will get the message that excessive noise will not be tolerated.