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Young activists push to pull plug on gas leaf blowers

By Pippa Fisher



From left: Jamie, Scout and Finn Renton are working hard to bring in restrictions on gas-powered leaf blowers. Photo Pippa Fisher

Three young Lafayette residents are fed up with noisy, polluting gas-powered leaf blowers. And they are doing something about it.

For 12-year-old Finn and his 10-year-old twin sisters, Scout and Jamie Renton, the tipping point came over the past months of remote learning as they struggled to hear their teachers on Zoom over the noise from leaf blowers in the neighborhood.

"We got interested in it because mostly everyone is at home because of COVID so we realized how much people use leaf blowers," explains Scout. "We decided to do some research and we found out how bad they are and decided to try and stop them from polluting the environment."

They definitely did their research and sent their findings to the city council, along with a letter dated Jan. 13 asking for action.

"Would you consider letting a pickup truck idle in your driveway with its tailpipe aimed at your open windows for three hours each week?" asked the kids in the letter to council, continuing, "If a gas leaf blower is being used in your yard, that's approximately the amount of pollutants that are entering your home environment for every 15 minutes of use." ...

The children point to the 60 cities in California that have banned or restricted use of gas-powered leaf blowers as well as research done in the city of Walnut Creek, and identify reasons they say the blowers are very bad for the environment in addition to noise and air pollution, such as harm to insects, especially bees. Instead they urge the use of rakes and electric leaf blowers, although they make the point that leaving the leaves to decompose, adding nutrients to the soil, would be better still.

The matter has come before the Environmental Task Force in the past and according to City Planning Director Greg Wolff, the issue remains on the task force's work list. Wolff says it is likely to come up this year and notes there is a joint city council and ETF meeting scheduled in March to review accomplishments and prioritize tasks for the next year. He says leaf blowers will likely be on that list.

Wolff welcomes the kids' input. "It's great to see youth involved in what will ultimately be their government," he says.

The city is also short by three planners, so assigning a staff member to the ETF has also contributed to slow progress.

Finn, who attends Stanley Middle School, is frustrated by the lack of action. "Even though kids have good ideas for saving the environment, adults do not take us seriously," he says.

The kids have also sent a letter to Lafayette School District Superintendent Richard Whitmore asking that gas-powered leaf blowers be banned from schools.

Jennifer Renton says she's not surprised her children are proactive for their ages since she and her husband have been environmentally conscious for a long time. Fifth-graders Scout and Jamie are members of the Environmental Club at Burton Valley Elementary School.

The children are planning on walking the neighborhood to hand out fliers they've created, educating residents about the dangers posed by gas-powered leaf blowers.

"Adults are the ones using gas leaf blowers but they do not think about the problems that they are causing and we will be the ones left when the adults have destroyed the environment," says Jamie.

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