

People power

Back in October 2006 a frustrated citizen of Auburn, Alabama, requested the City to develop a noise ordinance to control the external noise from vehicle sound systems – the dreaded boom box. He claimed that 95% of the problem was from moving vehicles, belting out at unacceptable levels. Two months later nothing had progressed, so he gave a forceful reminder... and action followed.

In December, Auburn’s new vehicle noise ordinance was born, backed by the power of the disorderly conduct section of the Alabama Criminal Code, and citations will be issued for any vehicle whose noise is considered to be unreasonable. For example, where the car stereo can be heard, or its vibration felt, at a distance of 25 feet or more. This is tough. Although heavy traffic might mask the noise, an offending vehicle on a quieter road will also be fingered by the police, leading to a fine of up to \$200 plus \$125 court costs.

Young drivers, particularly students from Auburn University, protest that they are singled out by the ordinance. There may be some truth in this, as they are an easy target for middle aged complainers, who may not be sympathetic to those students who are temporary Auburn residents. However, others point out that excess noise is not only annoying, but it is also a traffic hazard, obscuring the sound of emergency vehicles and other auditory warnings.

The City has been relaxed in the initial implementation. The police were instructed to issue only warnings during an initial 30 day education period starting January 10th 07. On completion of this trial period the ordinance has begun to bite. Booming boom boxes are out in Auburn.

We can learn from the sequence which has led to the ordinance.

- Instigation:** A resident kicks it off
- Regulation:** The City responds
- Education:** The public learns about the ordinance over a 30 day period
- Application:** The police enforce it.

A sensible progression which could be widely copied

LUTON AIRPORT

Complaints to Luton Airport about aircraft noise have almost tripled according to the latest figures. The number of complaints in the third quarter of the year - July to September 2006 - reached 728, compared to 273 in the same period in 2005. During the three months the number of night noise complaints also tripled from 84 to 231. John Davis, spokesperson for the Luton and District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN), thinks the reason is clearly because night flights at the airport have increased by 20 per cent. Speaking after the Luton Airport Consultative Committee meeting, he accused the airport management of an "arrogant and uncaring" response to the complaints. He said: 'When we asked them what they intended to do to curb the effects their operations are having on residents - particularly at night - they said they intended to continue their commercial operations as they saw fit and saw no reason to do anything other than monitor the situation.' He added: "They can fine a particularly noisy aircraft but only if it exceeds a very high noise level four miles down track. In fact no-one was fined in the last quarter, despite very many complaints which shows that the penalty system is worthless." Mr Davis added that the numbers of private helicopters travelling from the London to Luton was on the increase and this gave cause for concern because of the noise levels involved.

VOMITING

Vomiting is officially the most horrible sound ever, according to over a million votes cast worldwide in a mass online science experiment. Visitors to a website called BadVibes (www.sound101.org) - a research project from the University of Salford, UK. - listened to sounds such as a dentist's drill, fingernails scraping down a blackboard and aircraft flying, and rated them for unpleasantness. "This research has been fascinating in gaining an insight into why people are repulsed by certain sounds - and how this differs by gender, age and nationality. This is so important because noise significantly affects our quality of life," said Trevor Cox of the University's Acoustic Research Centre, who conducted the study. He added that he did it to explore the public's perceptions of unpleasant sounds and help inform the acoustics industry. Although fingernails scraping down a blackboard is widely claimed to be the worst sound, that screech came only 16th out of 34 sounds auditioned, he reported. Microphone feedback came a close second, with many babies crying coming third. "I am driven by a scientific curiosity about why people shudder at certain sounds and not others. We are pre-programmed to be repulsed by horrible things such as vomiting, as it is fundamental to staying alive to avoid nasty stuff," Cox said. "Similarly, the sound of fingernails down a blackboard has been compared to the warning cries of monkeys again, something that humans might instinctively respond to because of our ancestry." One finding was that females rated 25 out of the 34 sounds as more awful than males did. But baby cries were one of the few sounds males found worse than females. "It could be that females have become habituated to the sound of babies crying," said Cox, who is now planning a similar experiment to rate the most pleasant sound. He hopes to use the results to help inform industry about how to engineer more pleasant sounds.