

How much noise is too noisy? Toronto wants to hear from you

Francine Kopun - City Hall Reporter
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© Richard Lautens Many residents feel noise levels are increasing in the city. A 2017 Toronto Public Health report found almost two-thirds of the time the mean noise level was above Ontario Ministry of Environment and Climate Change guidelines — on average, about 10 decibels higher.

Toronto is reviewing its noise bylaw, which covers everything from railway whistles to air conditioners, animal noises and religious ceremonies, but consensus on what needs to be done to bring the bylaw up to date is proving elusive.

This Week's Circulars

“It’s been one of our most challenging files,” said Carleton Grant, director of policy and strategic support for Toronto’s municipal licensing and standards.

“Everyone has different levels of tolerance.”

A round of public consultations is set to launch Jan. 28 at the North York Civic Centre member’s lounge, four years after the review began in 2015.

Two of the biggest sticking points are how construction noises and amplified music should be regulated, [with residents calling for more controls, including new permits](#) related to noise control, in a city where new building and outdoor patios abound.

While businesses aren't entirely opposed to the idea of better noise regulation, they're not in a hurry to add another layer of bureaucracy to what is already a complex regulatory environment.

“Additional regulation in the form of permits is definitely something that is a concern,” said Paul De Berardis, director of building science and innovation at the Residential Construction Council of Ontario.

Permits add an element of uncertainty as the builder has to wait for approval and see whether conditions have been added, which can affect timelines and construction practices, De Berardis says.

The construction industry is open to improving noise mitigation practices and looking at what other cities in North America are doing, but De Berardis says that it's not possible to eliminate the construction noise that comes with city building.

“We're not against noise, but it needs to be managed,” said Cathie Macdonald, a spokesperson for the Toronto Noise Coalition (TNC).

Spencer Sutherland, a member of the board of directors for the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas, says the city doesn't currently plan for noise and it needs to start, instead of simply fining businesses.

“We like our neighbourhoods to be diverse, we like a mix of uses together that creates really good, vibrant neighbourhoods, but there are issues that go with that and we need to have mechanisms to help resolve those issues,” said Sutherland.

He would like to see new condo buildings held to a higher standard when it comes to sound insulation, so that residents aren't disturbed by noise from the businesses that may have attracted them to live in the neighbourhood in the first place.

He says he'd like to see a middleman established, to help businesses and residents resolve noise complaints without having to fine the businesses.

“The fact is, nobody wants to have noise issues. Most of the venue operators are pretty good people, if they can find a way to solve the problem, they will do it,” said Sutherland.

In search of answers, Municipal Licensing and Standards in 2016 convened a noise working group, including members of TNC, representatives from the construction, manufacturing and music industries, acoustical noise engineers and city staff from different divisions.

After meeting nine times over 2017, the group was unable to achieve consensus on key points.

Residents meanwhile, say the city is too noisy and getting noisier, creating public health risks that are not limited to hearing loss — the World Health Organization has found that even ordinary levels of noise in a city can impair sleep and cognitive function, and affect mental and cardiovascular health.

Harold Smith, a retired architect and a director of the Lytton Park Residents' Organization, believes that instead of tinkering with the bylaw to appease different interest groups, the city should start with the goal of maintaining public health, and draft a bylaw that supports that goal.

“We should try and develop the best noise bylaw and enforcement in the world,” said Smith, who says he attended all of the 2017 noise working group meetings. “But we’re not. I felt the city was trying to compromise with business and there was tremendous business pressure from the entertainment industry.”

How big a problem is noise in Toronto?

[A report from Toronto Public Health \(TPH\) in June, 2017](#), found that 62 per cent of the time the mean noise level in Toronto was above Ontario Ministry of Environment and Climate Change guidelines — on average, about 10 decibels higher.

The medical officer of health concluded that the available evidence suggested that environmental noise in Toronto occurs at levels that could be detrimental to health, and a draft noise management plan was undertaken. It’s expected to land in late 2019, according to TPH spokesperson Kate Bassil, acting associate director, healthy public policy.

[A poll conducted for the city on the topic last year](#) found that Toronto residents are less concerned about reducing noise pollution in the city compared to a number of other issues.

While less than half of respondents — 46 per cent — were concerned about noise pollution, 77 per cent were concerned about traffic and congestion, and more than 70 per cent said they were concerned with public safety, overcrowded transit and housing affordability.

Complicating the issue, the Toronto Police Service recently handed over policing of noise complaints to the city, following a recommendation by the Toronto Police Service Transformational Task Force Report, which outlined the modernization of policing in the city. It recommended diverting non-emergency calls to other city divisions and services.

“We 100 per cent agree it’s a bylaw control issue,” said Mark Sraga, director, investigation services, municipal licensing and standards for the City of Toronto.

There was also duplication, Sraga adds. Many people would call police and 311 with the same noise complaint. The changeover began in May, and there was a 22 per cent increase in noise complaints in 2018 over 2017 — 13,000 in all, ranging from barking dogs to raging parties.

But this may not be entirely because police have stopped taking the calls. Historically, noise complaint volumes rise every year.

“It’s hard to say it’s related to TPS no longer responding,” said Sraga.

The city has not hired any new bylaw enforcement officers to enforce the bylaw and has no plans to do so for now, Sraga says.

[The public consultations beginning Monday](#) will cover power equipment, motor vehicles, amplified sound, construction noise and general noise. Five meetings are scheduled around the city, ending Feb. 6.

The public consultation sessions are being guided by Swerhun Facilitation, the same firm that was hired by Ports Toronto to run public consultations on the issue of allowing jets at Billy Bishop Airport.

And while a resolution will have to be found, Sraga is not under the impression that everyone will be satisfied by the results.

“When it comes to issues like this, we don’t expect we’re going to make everybody happy,” he said. “It’s about getting the most practical bylaw that addresses this issue and has a reasonableness to it.”