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How Afghanistan Was Lost to the Russians

by SEN. and MRS. DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN

Shh! The Law Is Counting Your Decibels

Stephen Shames

In Bloomington, Minn., environmental health specialist Lon Loken (l) and police officer Kent Therkelsen keep their ears cocked on patrol of residential neighborhood.

by Brian Lowey

BLOOMINGTON, MINN.

Urban noise, a problem that robs millions of Americans of sleep, privacy, and health, has been linked to a growing list of ailments including stress and high blood pressure. For many people, what gripes them most about their neighborhoods is not crime, not urban blight, but noise—noise from aircraft, noise from the street, and noise from the house or apartment next door.

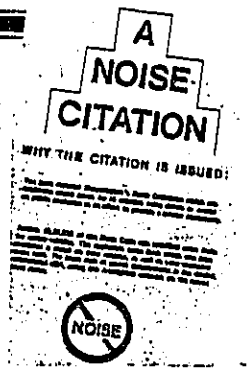
"Noise pollution is the No. 1 problem in the country," claims Al Perez, head of Minnesota's statewide noise program. "But noise pollution, unlike other forms of pollution, has plenty of solutions. Unfortunately, the people haven't made them well-known to the politicians."

Only a handful of towns around the country have tried to crack down on noise pollution—Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, Honolulu, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Portland, Ore., and Evansville, Ind. Noise experts around the country generally agree that some of the nation's toughest noise programs are to be found in San Diego, the Colorado towns of Boulder and Colorado Springs, and Bloomington, Minn.

Urban noise is driving many citizens batty, but a few towns find ways to crack down

Bloomington's noise program is typical of the most effective. Noise cops patrol the city's streets in a squad car equipped with sophisticated decibel-detection equipment, looking for cars, trucks and motorcycles that are excessively noisy. Motorists not only face an automatic fine, they have to fix their vehicles within 14 days and then provide proof of repairs at a compliance center where noise-readings of the vehicle are taken. If they don't show up for a test, a warrant is issued and they can be fined and jailed.

"If you get caught in other cities," says Bloomington Councilman Tom Spies, "you might get off with just paying a small fine instead of spending $100 for a new muffler system." But in Bloomington, you've got to buy that system—or else.



Summonses like this tell drivers they must fix faulty mufflers within 14 days—or face jail.

In Bloomington, you also can't run your lawnmower before 9 a.m. on Sunday and wake up your neighbor, for the city has specified that noisy outdoor power tools can only be operated during certain specified "noise periods." The same goes for garbage collection—and restaurants located near residential areas can't remain open around the clock because of the noisy traffic they generate. Do you like to snowmobile? Don't try it in Bloomington, for the city has banned the vehicle. "Too noisy," complains the city's noise chief, Lon Loken.

You can't even install a central air conditioner in Bloomington without the city's approval. Every central unit must pass muster before it can be installed, since noisy air conditioners are a frequent complaint (the city sees to it that units are installed in a location that won't annoy neighbors or are insulated to keep sound from leaking out).

In addition, Bloomington's street department has begun a program of resurfacing residential streets with quieter paving materials, and the city has required developers to build earth mounds known as "berms" to shield residents from noisy streets.

Lon Loken reports that the program has gathered wide support. "People call me up and say, 'Stake out my street at 2 a.m.!' " One citizen, Harold Lovik, often asks the noise police to check his gas station's parking lot. "The place got so noisy you couldn't hear the customers talking to you," he explains. "So I gave the noise car a place to park and hid it with my tow truck. They improved it 100 percent. It's a busy street, but now it's tolerable."

continued

'...the city even fights loud parties in apartments...'

SHH!

Bloomington, a suburb of the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, passed its noise ordinances in 1975 and 1976 in response to citizen complaints and census data, both of which showed noise to be a prime community concern. The ordinances incorporated features of a variety of state and municipal noise control proposals, plus some unique twists. The program went through with little opposition and has been beefed up since to the point that this city of 78,000 has one city employee plus a temporary employee working full-time on noise in summer, when problems peak.

Bloomington's police fill one slot in the noise program on a rotating basis. "At first, a lot of the guys were skeptical about the program," says Bloomington noise cop Dan Laurila. "But now even the old-timers who weren't gung-ho about the program are out there, writing the tags."

Bloomington's noise cops have even revived an ancient ally in their fight against noise—the horse. The city has horseback patrols that gallop after motorbikes in parks (and thus don't produce motor noises of their own in the pursuit). The city also fights loud parties in apartments by holding every guest, not just the host, legally responsible.

Bloomington also requires its industries to limit the amount of noise they allow to leak over their property lines. The city, for example, turned its enforcers loose on a foundry after nearby residents complained of late-night sounds coming from the plant, as well as a smokestack fan. The cops slapped a curfew on loud activity in the plant and demanded that a giant muffler be installed on the chimney. "Before all that you couldn't even use the yard," says one of the foundry's neighbors, Mrs. Jerrold Mueller. "But now you can't believe the difference! You know, we live with so much noise and congestion nowadays that I think all cities will have to set up departments like this."

Bloomington's program has gained enough popularity that other cities are coming in and copying it, and neighboring suburbs are taking steps to begin motor vehicle noise enforcement programs. But municipal noise control programs received perhaps their most impressive demonstration of citizen support last year in San Diego. The city's program, long thought to be among the best in the country, was virtually put out of business by California's giant tax cut, Proposition 13.

"But afterward, a very interesting thing happened," recalls San Diego program head Jim Dukes. "After about two months, we began to hear little rashes of 'noise we didn't know we were suppressing. And then people started writing their councilmen and writing this office and saying, 'Listen, for two years it's been o.k., but now the noise has gone crazy.'"

This citizen outcry helped raise the program up out of its own ashes, and now it's back in business.

How Other Cities Can Get Help

Communities looking to start their own noise programs can get some help from the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA, through its regional offices, will provide interested towns with experts, equipment loans, and, in some cases, a little start-up money. The EPA has also started a program that enables communities to borrow noise control workers from established programs, thereby gaining the insight of a seasoned veteran. Information about this program, known as ECHO (Each Community Helps Others), is available from your regional EPA office.

In spite of all these programs, municipal noise control workers continue to be rare birds. In fact, Jesse Barthwick, executive director of NANCO (the National Association of Noise Control Officials, an organization of noise control workers), estimates that there are only 20 to 30 municipal noise control programs in the country with full-time employees.

Even though a few cities have made progress, the truth is that for most of the country, noise remains a disease with many cures but few doctors.