

## Levin: Small step, or quantum leap?

By Guest Column /Lois A. Levin  
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Local policy changes targeted at widespread environmentally destructive activities often have a ripple effect beyond the local community. These days, information spreads very rapidly, and copycat policies are common. Bicycle-friendly programs in Bogota quickly affect policy-makers in San Francisco, Sydney and Boston.

Take the ubiquitous plastic bag, or the gas-powered leaf blower. Their widespread use has had serious negative impacts worldwide on public health and the environment.

People are eager to take concrete steps to address their concerns about the environment and global warming. It is not surprising that soon after the enactment of a local ban on the distribution of free throwaway plastic bags, and notwithstanding years of resistance by retailers, the public enthusiastically embraced the idea of reusable bags. Retailers immediately began to cut costs, reduce waste, conserve fossil fuel and protect wildlife. Citizens and corporations alike were able to conserve natural resources without suffering hardship and with only minor inconvenience. It is socially rewarding to make this shift. By carrying reusable bags to the grocery store, we instantly become behavior models for children, friends, neighbors, employees and virtually everyone who observes us.

Newton has been considering a local ordinance to regulate the use of leaf blowers, due to concerns about noise. Almost lost in the discussion is the fact that gasoline-powered small engines are disproportionately large contributors to air pollution. Those little engines produce highly toxic emissions, while turning debris and allergens into tiny airborne particles that create significant health risks for millions of landscape workers and city residents.

Although banning leaf blowers locally would appear to be an indirect approach to addressing the widespread environmental and health problems created by small engines, it turns out that local bans can and do provide the impetus for state and national legislation. And is there any doubt that manufacturers everywhere should be required to design more energy-saving and safer lawn care equipment? Global warming is happening now; this is an urgent matter.

A lone plastic bag is benign enough, but trillions of them are produced annually, and their environmental impact is huge. A small engine is a minor contributor to global warming, but there are hundreds of millions of small engines worldwide, and their environmental impact is also huge. A bicycle can at best take a few cars off the road, but many millions of bicycles could change the world.

Small engine manufacturers use the same arguments and tactics that auto manufacturers used for decades fighting regulations of automobile engines. They claim that reducing noise and pollution will create prohibitive costs for retailers or consumers, and allege that pollution-control devices create hazards, whereas, in fact,

the devices are as effective as the catalytic converters found on every automobile sold in the U.S. for the last 30 years.

Companies fear losing income whenever regulatory mechanisms are proposed, but such fears are often misplaced. Just as there is no credible evidence that switching to reusable bags has led to loss of income for retailers or hardship for consumers, there is no credible evidence that regulating leaf blowers has led to loss of income for landscapers or hardship for their customers; leaf blowers are very efficient for fall cleanups, but rakes and brooms are just as efficient, and often more effective, for routine maintenance. Newton homeowners will continue to pay for fairly priced landscape maintenance services. We adapted quickly to the ban on plastic bags. We will learn quickly how to clean up our properties without relying exclusively on gas-powered leaf blowers. Change generates costs, but costs can be recovered. And laws can be written (or modified) to ensure that costs are distributed equitably. Failure to change results in much greater, and more insidious, health and environmental costs, which are borne by all of us.

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