

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - April 18, 2013

How much noise can people stand?

by Jim Humphrey
MCCF Planning and Land Use Chair

Five or six mornings a week for the past year or so, I have been awakened by construction noise: the beeping sound of trucks backing up, a front-end loader shoveling a load of gravel into the bed of a dump truck, the grinding noise of a circular saw cutting through metal, and heavy pipes and new fire hydrants being dropped into truck beds. I have the misfortune of living fifty yards or so from a staging area for a Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) water main replacement project in my community just west of downtown Bethesda.

Don't get me wrong. I am thrilled that the water pipes in my neighborhood are being replaced by WSSC. Two years ago there were two water main breaks occurring about six months apart on my block alone. So I understand that the seventy-some year old pipes had to be replaced, and I'm thankful that is occurring. But this construction work is taking a physical, psychological, and even emotional toll on me.

In July 2010, I wrote a Federation Corner column entitled "You'll have to speak up," which detailed the trials and tribulations of my neighbors and I living in a construction zone for nearby residential infill projects, otherwise referred to as bash-and-builds, for much of the preceding decade. But there was little truly nerve-jarring noise involved in those projects, except for the demolition phase of those projects when the existing home structure was torn down and tossed in dump trucks to be hauled away to the landfill.

Most of the noise associated with the process of replacing older single-family homes with newer structures involves the actual construction of the new house--the sounds of hammering and sawing, which one can acclimate oneself to. But the impact on the human body, the damage to one's nervous system as a result of living near this staging area for the WSSC water main replacement project in my community, is something I could not have predicted.

The movement and loading of heavy equipment that shakes nearby homes and their residents is literally heart-stopping. There is that moment when I wonder whether the noise and shock wave are from an earthquake, a plane falling from the sky onto the neighborhood, or a tree limb crashing down on my home (it happens more frequently than one would think with silver maples of the age I have in my yard). Then, after a second, I realize that it is just the normal, ongoing, incessant activity of the WSSC project...noise that can happen anytime from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. six days a week, Monday through Saturday (and sometimes continuing several hours after 7 p.m. in the evening if they have not reached a convenient stopping point for the day).

I suppose that what I and my neighbors are suffering from is noise-induced stress.

I recall reading about the Harvard rat experiments in the 1960s, in which laboratory rats were allowed to overpopulate in a confined space. Eventually the activity and noise associated simply with the rise in population drove some rats to aggressively attack their cage mates; some preferred isolation and withdrew from social interaction; still others lost their body hair from the negative impact of stress on their nervous systems; and the incidence of spontaneous abortions in pregnant females rose, and on and on.

The situation also brings to mind the kind of psychological torture you hear is imposed on prisoners-of-war, with loud music blasted into their cells twenty-four hours a day wearing their nerves to a frazzle so that they break down and finally tell their captors some sought-after information.

Is this what we humans are doing to ourselves? It sure feels that way some days in my neighborhood. And to top it off, a house fifty yards from mine in the opposite direction of the WSSC staging area is being sold, to be torn down and replaced by yet another McMansion. So I will soon be living with stereo construction noise coming from both directions.

I am certain that my neighbors and I are not alone in being subjected to this nearly unbearable din. It must be happening in neighborhoods all across the region and the country. And I don't have an answer to the problem, some sort of legislative or regulatory fix that could help those of us who don't commute to school or work but instead work from home, or are retired, and now find ourselves surrounded by relentless, overwhelming construction noise in what should be peaceful residential neighborhoods.

I would like to file a lawsuit claiming the unceasing racket from nearby construction sites has had a severe negative impact on my physical and psychological health, and has resulted in a loss of my ability to enjoy my home, which in legal terms might be considered a form of "taking" (that is, the taking of the value of a property without compensating the owner). But there would be multiple parties to sue (over the past fourteen years, there have been twelve bash-and-builds and four major home addition projects within a block of my home in addition to the WSSC pipe replacement project), the court case would drag on for months if not years, and in all likelihood I wouldn't prevail.

But I would sure like somebody to pay for the loss of peace and quiet in my neighborhood...and I'd like the noise to stop.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com