



Report of the Rules & Ordinances Committee

Meeting Date: May 5, 2026

The Committee convened on Tuesday, at 6:30 pm in the third-floor conference room, with remote participation by Zoom.

Present were Councilors Nicole Gardner, Chair, Lisa Feltner, Vice Chair, and John Gannon, Secretary. Also present in the room were Councilor Vinnie Piccirilli and Municipal Policy Analyst Doug Newton. Joining by Zoom were Public Health Director Abbey Myers, Councilor Tony Palomba, Angie Kounelis, George Skuse, Linda Scott, and Joan Gumbleton.

Councilor Gardner called the meeting to order at 6:30pm. The purpose of the meeting was to continue discussion of a proposed noise ordinance.

The Committee began by reviewing open items raised in prior meetings.

- Attachment A is the current Watertown noise ordinance
- Attachment B is a document with proposed edits provided by Councilor Feltner
- Attachment C is the original draft ordinance provided by staff.
- Attachment D is a revised version coming out of the Committee's second meeting.
- Attachment E is an updated table of benchmarks from local communities, with formatting changes only.
- Attachment F is public comment received prior to this meeting

Statement of Purpose: The Committee agreed to discuss the Statement of Purpose in greater detail and consider proposed changes at the next meeting on May 13th.

Vibration. The question of whether the noise ordinance should cover non-audible vibrations was discussed. During the discussion, the following points were made:

- Two neighboring towns, Cambridge and Newton, regulate vibration, one in a stand-alone ordinance and one by including it in the noise ordinance.
- Councilor Gardner said that audible vibrations would, by definition, be covered under the noise ordinance. So the question is limited only to non-audible vibrations, which she felt was not within the scope of a noise ordinance.
- Councilor Feltner noted that vibrations can have negative health effects.
- The Director of Public Health expressed concerns about including vibration in the noise ordinance. Vibration is difficult to prove or disprove, making enforceability challenging. Furthermore, Public Health staff are not trained in this field. Specialized and sophisticated equipment and expertise are required, such as sound engineers and structural engineers.
- When vibration is alleged to cause structural damage, it falls under the purview of the Building Inspector.

- Councilor Gannon expressed concerns about the legality of regulating non-audible vibration.

The Committee concluded that vibration should not be covered in the Noise Ordinance, but the matter warrants further investigation.

→ Action Item: Councilor Feltner made a motion, seconded by Councilor Gannon, to recommend the City Council refer the matter of vibration to the Rules & Ordinances Committee for further study, including the legal considerations, and report back with a recommendation. The motion passed unanimously.

Tonal Noise. The question of whether the threshold for tonal noise should be 5dbA above ambient noise, or 3dbA. Ms. Meyers said she felt it should be 5dbA for the following reasons:

- It is a meaningful step above ambient, making it easier to measure and determine if there is a violation or not.
- 3dbA is too small a distinction, creating measurement uncertainty. Further, it would be prone to challenges.

In the course of discussion she also shared the following:

- Staff are trained on equipment, and a measurement takes two people, herself or her deputy, and a second person. Measurements can include multiple readings, and can include multiple locations. If needed, staff will go over the jurisdictional line to take measurements. Measurements are taken in different seasons since sound can be affected by many factors. Ambient noise level is measured in the neighborhood in an area where the tone is no longer audible.
- They average one or fewer complaints per month.
- Equipment is recalibrated after every reading.
- They are most often called for mechanical and consistent noise.
- If there is a dispute or challenge, they invite the DEP to do a second reading.

The Committee concluded that 5dbA was the appropriate measurement to be used for tonal noise.

During the course of the discussion, Councilor Gannon asked about repeated noise complaints from Ms. Cedar Pruitt of Newton. Ms. Myers said that staff had taken measurements and at the time the difference in noise level was below regulatory limits.

Exclusion for domestic animals on residential and commercial property. The Committee agreed that residents should not be subject to continuous loud animal noise, whether from a neighbor's home, or a business nearby. The Committee concluded that domestic animals, whether on residential or commercial property, should not be exempted from this ordinance, and agreed to strike this exclusion in its entirety.

Boundary determining a violation of the noise ordinance.

- The Committee agreed that the measurement should be taken at the property line of any property (residential, commercial, non-profit, etc.).
- The Committee discussed the fact that in large properties that are publicly accessible, such as a large mixed use development, the public has the right to expect ambient noise consistent with the neighborhood. Sometimes machinery can bring the noise level more than 10dbA or 5 dbA (if tonal) above ambient. Therefore the Committee added a clause stipulating that measurement will be taken 50 feet away from the source of noise within any property that has publicly accessible space.

Manner in which a violation occurs. Councilor Gannon said that he felt it was important to strike the words “willfully, negligently, or through failure to provide necessary equipment, service, or maintenance or to take necessary precautions” from the ordinance, for simplicity. Councilor Gardner felt these words might help the staff explain why someone was responsible if in violation, regardless of their reason. When asked, Ms. Meyers said that she didn’t think the proposed change would change the enforceability of the ordinance either way. The Committee agreed to strike this language.

Construction and Demolition and Domestic and Commercial Maintenance – allowed hours.

- The Committee agreed to change the language to say when these activities were allowed, rather than when they were not allowed, since it would be simpler to understand.
- The Committee removed the language on where measurements take place since it is not applicable in this section.

Waiver.

- The Committee asked Ms. Meyers and Mr. Newton to prepare Departmental Regulations for the Committee to review.
- The Committee agreed that all councilors should receive copies of waivers issued.
- Minor wording changes were made, for clarity and accuracy.

Penalty. Councilor Gannon recommended the following language be added: Each subsequent day or part thereof of violation of this Chapter, whether continuous or intermittent, shall be construed as a separate and succeeding offence. The Committee agreed.

Right of Appeal. Councilor Feltner asked that this be placed on the agenda of the next meeting.

The meeting was continued with a unanimous vote at 8:52 pm.

Report prepared by Nicole Gardner

Chapter 95

NOISE REGULATIONS

§ 95.01.	Prohibition of noise emissions.	§ 95.04.	Exceptions.
§ 95.02.	Definitions and measurements of noise.	§ 95.05.	Enforcement.
§ 95.03.	Duties and responsibilities of City departments.	§ 95.99.	Penalty.

§ 95.01. Prohibition of noise emissions. [Ord. 6, passed 9-13-1983; amended Ord. 14, passed 3-12-1996]

- (A) No person owning, leasing or controlling a source of sound shall willfully, negligently, or through failure to provide necessary equipment, service, or maintenance or to take necessary precautions cause, suffer, allow or permit unnecessary emissions from said source of sound that may cause noise.
- (B) Division (A) of this section shall pertain to, but shall not be limited to, prolonged unattended sounding of burglar alarms, construction and demolition equipment which characteristically emit sound but which may be fitted and accommodated with equipment such as enclosures to suppress sound or may be operated in a manner so as to suppress sound, suppressible and preventable industrial and commercial sources of sound, and other man-made sounds that cause noise.
- (C) All devices employed in construction or demolition shall be prohibited from use during the hours of:
 - (1) 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. from Monday through Friday;
 - (2) 7:00 p.m. on Fridays through 8:00 a.m. on Saturdays; and
 - (3) 7:00 p.m. on Saturdays through 8:00 a.m. on Sundays.

§ 95.02. Definitions and measurements of noise. [Ord. 6, passed 9-13-1983]

- (A) The City hereby incorporates into and makes a part of this chapter the provisions of Chapter 310 Code of Massachusetts Regulations, Section 7.00 entitled Air Pollution Control Regulations.
- (B) These regulations shall govern the definitions, measurement and restriction of sources of noise emission.
- (C) For the purposes of this chapter, a "condition of noise pollution" shall be a noise source which increases noise levels 10 dB or more above the background noise level. If the noise level is judged by ear to have a tonal sound, an increase of 5 dB above background noise level is sufficient to cause noise pollution.

§ 95.03. Duties and responsibilities of City departments. [Ord. 6, passed 9-13-1983]

- (A) All City departments and agencies shall, to the fullest extent consistent with other laws, carry out their programs in such a manner as to further the policy of this chapter.

- (B) All City departments and agencies shall comply with Federal and State laws and regulations and the provisions and intent of this ordinance respecting the control and abatement of noise to the same extent that any person is subject to such laws and regulations.

§ 95.04. Exceptions. [Ord. 6, passed 9-13-1983]

This chapter shall apply to the control of all sound originating within the limits of the City of Watertown except the following:

- (A) The emission of sound for the purpose of alerting persons to the existence of an emergency or to the emission of sound in the performance of emergency work or in training exercises related to emergency activities.
- (B) Noncommercial public speaking and public assembly activities as guaranteed by state and federal constitutions.
- (C) Domestic equipment such as lawn mowers and power saws between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m.

§ 95.05. Enforcement. [Ord. 6, passed 9-13-1983]

The Board of Health shall be the primary enforcement agency of the terms of this chapter. In addition, any Police Department or Fire Department official or building inspector or their designee, acting within their jurisdictional area, is authorized to enforce this chapter.

§ 95.99. Penalty. [Ord. 6, passed 9-13-1983]

- (A) Any person who violates any provision of this chapter, if convicted, shall be fined no less than \$50 nor more than \$100 for the first offense and not less than \$200 nor more than \$500 for each succeeding offense.
- (B) Each subsequent day or part thereof of violation of this chapter, whether the violation be continuous or intermittent, shall be construed as a separate and succeeding offense.

95.01 Statement of Purpose

A. Noise (and vibration) is a (are) serious hazard(s) to public health, welfare, safety, and quality of life. A substantial body of science and technology exists by which noise (and vibration) may be measured and substantially abated, and the people have a right to and should be ensured an environment free from excessive noise (and vibration) that may jeopardize their health, welfare, or safety, or degrade the quality of life. This chapter serves to address the control of noise (and vibration) originating within the limits of the City of Watertown.

Note: discussion about including tonal as well as max. allowable w/duration, and zones; send table/chart.

95.02 Definitions

A. Construction and demolition: any site preparation, assembly, erection, substantial repair, alteration, destruction or similar action for public or private rights-of-way, structures, utilities, or similar property.

B. Emergency: George-Doug to clarify /refine

C. Emergency Work: keep this? George-Doug to clarify/refine

D. Noise pollution: a noise source which increases noise levels 10 dBA or more above the background noise level “prescribed in 95.03(A)” -discuss this further... If the noise source is a tonal sound, 3 dBA above background noise [discussion included seeing Max. Allowable exterior sound level standards table/chart, which includes duration]

E. The sound pressure level in decibels as measured on a sound level meter using the A-weighting network **and Fast response setting**. The level so read is designated dB(A) or dBA.

F. Ambient noise level: -changes? To be confirmed next R&O mtg

G. Plainly Audible: **Any sound that can be detected by a person using ~~his or her~~ their unaided (typical? TBD) hearing faculties. As an example, if the sound source under investigation is a portable or personal vehicular sound amplification or reproduction device, the enforcement officer need not determine the title of a song, specific words, or the artist performing the song. The detection of the rhythmic bass component of the music is sufficient.**

H. Tonal Noise -consider Newton and Waltham examples.

Next R&O mtg, determine need for additional Definitions or edits to draft.

WHEREAS noise pollution is a hazard to public health, welfare, safety, and quality of life; and whereas a substantial body of science and technology exists by which noise pollution may be measured and abated; and,

WHEREAS a substantial body of science and technology exists by which noise pollution may be measured and abated; and,

WHEREAS people have a right to and should be ensured an environment free from excessive noise pollution that may jeopardize their health, welfare, or safety.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT ORDAINED by the City Council of Watertown that Title IX, Chapter 95 of the Watertown Code of Ordinances, inclusive of all sections, is hereby repealed and replaced in its entirety with a new Chapter 95 as follows:

95.01 Statement of Purpose

- A. Noise pollution is a hazard to public health, welfare, safety, and quality of life. A substantial body of science and technology exists by which noise pollution may be measured and abated, and the people have a right to and should be ensured an environment free from excessive noise pollution that may jeopardize their health, welfare, or safety. This chapter serves to address persistent noise pollution rather than fleeting noise inherent to life in a densely populated community such as Watertown.

95.02 Definitions:

- A. Construction and demolition: Any of the following:
1. excavation, highway construction, land development or land clearing work;
 2. the erection, demolition, alteration, repair, or relocation of any building or structure, which uses powered equipment including, but not limited to, backhoes, trucks, tractors, excavators, earth moving equipment, compressors, motorized or power hand tools, manual tools, or equipment of a similar nature as well as two-way radios or other communication equipment;
 3. the use of any equipment for recycling, screening, separating, or any other processing of soil, rocks, concrete, asphalt or other raw material
- B. Emergency: Any occurrence or set of circumstances involving actual or imminent physical hazard or property damage which demands immediate action
- C. Emergency work: Any work performed for the purpose of preventing or alleviating the physical hazard or property damage threatened or caused by an emergency
- D. Noise pollution: A noise source which increases noise level above ambient to the level prescribed in 95.03 (A)
- E. A-weighted decibels (dbA): The A-weighted sound-pressure level expressed in decibels

- F. Ambient noise level: The sound level associated with a given environment, being a composite of sounds from all sources excluding the alleged offensive noise, at the location and approximate time at which a comparison with the alleged offensive noise is to be made
- G. Plainly audible: Any sound that can be detected by a person of normal hearing ability using his or her unaided hearing facilities

95.03 Prohibition of Noise Pollution

- A. Any activity, other than those exempted by 95.03(B) below, which creates or produces sound measured at 10 dbA above ambient noise level at any of the following locations shall be deemed a violation of this section:
 - 1. The property line of any residential property or of any condominium or apartment house
 - 2. At least fifty feet away from the source of noise if in a non-residential setting if applicable
- B. Noise emanating from the operation of the following is exempt from the application of this section 95.03:
 - 1. Motor vehicles on a public highway
 - 2. Equipment used for construction and demolition
 - 3. Equipment used in domestic or commercial maintenance
 - 4. Domestic animals on a residential or commercial property
 - 5. Noncommercial public speaking and public assembly as protected by state and federal constitutions
 - 6. An emergency or emergency work
 - 7. City-sponsored events
- C. No person owning, leasing or controlling a source of sound shall cause, suffer, allow or permit unnecessary emissions from said source of sound that causes noise pollution via any of the following manners:
 - 1. Willfully
 - 2. Negligently
 - 3. Or through failure to provide necessary equipment, service, or maintenance or to take necessary precautions

95.04 Construction and Demolition

- A. All devices employed in construction or demolition which are plainly audible at any of the following locations shall be prohibited from use during the hours of 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM on weekdays, from 7:00 PM to 8:00 AM on Saturdays, and at any time on Sundays and legal holidays:
 - 1. The property line of any residential property or of any condominium or apartment house
 - 2. At least fifty feet away from the source of noise if in a non-residential setting, if applicable

- B. Nothing in this section shall be construed to prohibit noise emanating from vehicles used in construction or demolition for the purposes of safety such as backup alarms on a vehicle.

95.08 Domestic and Commercial Maintenance

- A. All devices employed in domestic or commercial lawn, garden, or grounds maintenance which are plainly audible at any of the following locations shall be prohibited between the hours of 7:00 PM and 7:00 AM on weekdays and from 7:00 PM to 8:00 AM on Saturdays, Sundays and legal holidays:
 - 1. The property line of any residential property or of any condominium or apartment house
 - 2. At least fifty feet away from the source of noise if in a non-residential setting, if applicable

95.09 Noise Waiver

- A. The Director of Public Health or his or her designee may grant a waiver for any activity otherwise forbidden by the provisions of this chapter upon a determination that compliance in the conduct of such activity would cause undue hardship on the person or persons conducting such activity or on the community, taking into account the extent of noise pollution caused by not requiring such compliance and whether reasonable efforts have been made to abate the noise. The Director of Public Health shall establish appropriate procedures for the processing of requests for such waivers, including such hearings as he or she deems appropriate. The Director of Public Health may seek the input of the Superintendent of Public Works in noise waiver requests related to construction or demolition. In granting any such waiver, the Director of Public Health may impose such appropriate conditions as he or she deems necessary pursuant to this section. Copies of all such waivers shall be filed with the clerk of the city council and to each ward city councilor whose ward is affected by the waiver promptly after issuance.

95.10 Enforcement

- A. The provisions of this chapter may be enforced by the Director of Public Health or his or her designee. The provisions of this chapter may also be enforced by the Chief of Police or his or her designee. Each violation shall be deemed as a separate offense.

95.99 Penalty

- A. Any person who violates any provision of this chapter shall be issued a verbal warning for the first offense, then fined as follows:
 - 1. \$100 for the second offense
 - 2. \$200 for the third offense
 - 3. \$300 for the fourth offense and each subsequent offense
- B. Nothing in this section shall be deemed to limit the use of other lawful methods of abating violations of this section, including but not limited to application for equitable relief from a court of law.

WHEREAS noise pollution is a hazard to public health, welfare, safety, and quality of life; and

WHEREAS a substantial body of science and technology exists by which noise pollution may be measured and abated; and

WHEREAS people have a right to and should be ensured an environment free from excessive noise pollution that may jeopardize their health, welfare, or safety.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT ORDAINED by the City Council of Watertown that Title IX, Chapter 95 of the Watertown Code of Ordinances, inclusive of all sections, is hereby repealed and replaced in its entirety with a new Chapter 95 as follows:

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95.02 Definitions:

- A. Construction and demolition: Any site preparation, assembly, erection, substantial repair, alteration, destruction, or similar action for public or private rights of way, structures, utilities, or similar property, and also the use of any equipment for any processing of any material.
- B. Emergency: Any occurrence or set of circumstances involving actual or imminent physical hazard or property damage which demands immediate action
- C. Emergency work: Any work performed to prevent or alleviate the physical hazard or property damage threatened or caused by an emergency
- D. Noise pollution: A noise source which increases noise level above ambient to the level prescribed in 95.03 (A)
- E. A-weighted decibels (dbA): The A-weighted sound-pressure level expressed in decibels
- F. Ambient noise level: The sound level associated with a given environment, being a composite of sounds from all sources excluding the alleged offensive noise, at the location and approximate time at which a comparison with the alleged offensive noise is to be made
- G. Plainly audible: any sound that is detectable and distinguishable from ambient or background noise at a specified location, such that the sound's source or character can be reasonably identified under ordinary conditions. A determination of plainly audible sound may be made by direct observation.

- H. Tonal noise: any noise that is judged by a listener to have the characteristics of a pure tone, whine, hum, or buzz

95.03 Prohibition of Noise Pollution

- A. Any activity, other than those exempted by 95.03(B) below, which creates or produces sound measured at 10 dbA above ambient noise level at any of the following locations shall be deemed a violation of this section:
1. The property line of any residential property or of any condominium or apartment house
 2. At least fifty feet away from the source of noise if in a non-residential setting if applicable
- B. When a tonal noise, as defined in 95.02 (H) above, is emitted, the creation or production of noise measured at 5 dbA above ambient noise level at any of the following locations shall be deemed a violation of this section:
1. The property line of any residential property or of any condominium or apartment house
 2. At least fifty feet away from the source of noise if in a non residential setting if applicable
- C. Noise emanating from the operation of the following is exempt from the application of this section 95.03:
1. Motor vehicles on a public highway
 2. Equipment used for construction and demolition
 3. Equipment used in domestic or commercial maintenance
 4. Domestic animals on a residential or commercial property
 5. Noncommercial public speaking and public assembly as protected by state and federal constitutions
 6. An emergency or emergency work
 7. City-sponsored events
- D. No person owning, leasing or controlling a source of noise shall cause, suffer, allow or permit unnecessary emissions from said source of noise that causes noise pollution via any of the following manners:
1. Willfully
 2. Negligently
 3. Or through failure to provide necessary equipment, service, or maintenance or to take necessary precautions

95.04 Construction and Demolition

- A. All devices employed in construction or demolition which are plainly audible at any of the following locations shall be prohibited from use during the hours of 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM on

weekdays, from 7:00 PM to 8:00 AM on Saturdays, and at any time on Sundays and legal holidays:

1. The property line of any residential property or of any condominium or apartment house
 2. At least fifty feet away from the source of noise if in a non-residential setting, if applicable
- B. Nothing in this section shall be construed to prohibit noise emanating from vehicles used in construction or demolition for the purposes of safety such as backup alarms on a vehicle.

95.05 Domestic and Commercial Maintenance

- A. All devices employed in domestic or commercial lawn, garden, or grounds maintenance which are plainly audible at any of the following locations shall be prohibited between the hours of 7:00 PM and 7:00 AM on weekdays and from 7:00 PM to 8:00 AM on Saturdays, Sundays and legal holidays:
1. The property line of any residential property or of any condominium or apartment house
 2. At least fifty feet away from the source of noise if in a non-residential setting, if applicable

95.06 Noise Waiver

- A. The Director of Public Health or his or her designee may grant a waiver for any activity otherwise forbidden by the provisions of this chapter upon a determination that compliance in the conduct of such activity would cause undue hardship on the person or persons conducting such activity or on the community, taking into account the extent of noise pollution caused by not requiring such compliance and whether reasonable efforts have been made to abate the noise. The Director of Public Health shall establish appropriate procedures for the processing of requests for such waivers, including such hearings as he or she deems appropriate. The Director of Public Health may seek the input of the Superintendent of Public Works in noise waiver requests related to construction or demolition. In granting any such waiver, the Director of Public Health may impose such appropriate conditions as he or she deems necessary pursuant to this section. Copies of all such waivers shall be filed with the clerk of the city council and to each ward city councilor whose ward is affected by the waiver promptly after issuance.

95.07 Enforcement

- A. The provisions of this chapter may be enforced by the Director of Public Health or their designee. The provisions of this chapter may also be enforced by the Chief of Police or their designee, the Fire Chief or their designee, and the Building Inspector or their designee. Each violation shall be deemed as a separate offense.

95.08 Penalty

- A. Any person who violates any provision of this chapter shall be issued a written and verbal warning for the first offense, then fined as follows:
 - 1. \$100 for the second offense
 - 2. \$200 for the third offense
 - 3. \$300 for the fourth offense and each subsequent offense
- B. Nothing in this section shall be deemed to limit the use of other lawful methods of abating violations of this section, including but not limited to application for equitable relief from a court of law.

Noise Ordinance Benchmarks - Watertown & Neighboring Towns								
March, 2026								
		Newton	Belmont	Waltham	Current Watertown	Proposed Watertown	Arlington	
Prohibited at all times as persistent noise pollution; not a fleeting sound. NB: Construction, Demolition, and Maintenance equipment exempt.								
	Above ambient noise	10 dbA	5 dbA*	10 dbA	10 db	10 dbA	85 dbA total noise level (not above ambient)	
	Above tonal noise	5 dbA	--	5 dbA	5 db			
Construction & Demolition allowed hours of use								
	Weekday	7am-7pm	7am-8pm	7am-5pm	7am-7pm	7am-7pm	8am-6pm	
	Saturday	8am-7pm	7am-8pm	8am-4pm	8am-7pm	8am-7pm	9am-5pm	
	Sunday	Prohibited	dbA limited	Prohibited	8am-7pm	prohibited	9am-5pm	
	Holiday	Prohibited	dbA limited	Prohibited	not specified	prohibited	9am-5pm	
			no louder than 70/80/90 dbA at 50 ft from activity, depending on device					
 Measured from	not specified	50 feet from activity	not specified	not specified	at property line or 50ft from activity (non residential setting)	at property line	
Lawn Maintenance allowed hours of use								
					Commercial	Residential	Both Comm'l + Res'l.	
	Weekday	7am-8pm	7am-8pm	7am-9pm	exempt	7am-9pm	7am-7pm	7:30am-6pm
	Saturday	9:30am-8pm	7am-8pm	7am-9pm	exempt	7am-9pm	8am-7pm	8am-4pm
	Sunday	9:30am-8pm	9am-8pm	9am-9pm	exempt	7am-9pm	8am-7pm	8am-4pm
	Holiday	9:30am-8pm	9am-8pm	9am-9pm	exempt	7am-9pm	8am-7pm	8am-4pm
			no louder than 80 dbA at 50 ft from activity, dbA limited outside of such hours					
*Belmont has also two "noise zones." Zone 1 is "All residential properties and the grounds of any school, hospital or similar health care institution, house of worship or library while the same is in use, and any Cemetery or Open Space Subdistrict." Zone 2 is all other properties.								
Prepared by Doug Newton								

Public Comment Received Prior to the meeting:

“Dear Councilor Gardner, Councilor Feltner, and Councilor Gannon:

I am writing as a Watertown resident to express my support for the 2026 draft noise ordinance currently under review by the Committee on Rules and Ordinances.

Updating Chapter 95 has been a long time coming. The 1983 ordinance and its subsequent 2022 revisions have left residents with few practical remedies for sustained, disruptive noise, and enforcement has remained difficult for exactly that reason. I appreciate the work that has gone into crafting an approach that is scientifically grounded, proportionate to Watertown's mixed residential and commercial character, and actually enforceable.

I would encourage the committee to pay particular attention to tonal noise as the ordinance is finalized. This is not a peripheral concern. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection released a discussion document on March 2, 2026, proposing significant revisions to its 1990 Noise Policy (under 310 CMR 7.10), and among its central areas of focus is the treatment of tonal or "pure tone" conditions — situations where a sound source produces a frequency that stands out sharply from surrounding background noise. MassDEP is proposing to update its tonal sound evaluation guidance to align with current acoustical best practices under ANSI S12.9-2005. Watertown's ordinance would benefit from language that harmonizes with this evolving state framework, particularly with respect to how tonal noise is defined and measured. MassDEP is also proposing that compliance be evaluated at the location of actual affected receptors — residences, schools, and similar sensitive uses — rather than solely at property lines. Adopting this receptor-based approach in Chapter 95 would strengthen the ordinance's practical reach and align it with the direction state policy is heading.

The importance of tonal noise treatment as well as amplified noise/music is not abstract to residents in this city. Those living near the outdoor hockey rink at Casey Park have experienced precisely the kind of tonal and impact noise that a well-drafted ordinance should address. Combined with loud profanity, this affects citizens' health and stress levels. I am grateful the committee is aware of how qualitatively different this kind of noise is from ordinary ambient sound. It is a textbook example of why both the character and the intensity of a noise source matter, not just its decibel level in isolation.

This also raises a point worth preserving in the final ordinance: city-owned and city-operated facilities should be held to the same standards as any private actor. The principle that all city departments must comply with the ordinance to the same extent as any person is a sound one, and it should be applied in practice, not just on paper.

I am also encouraged that the 2026 draft takes a more balanced approach than earlier versions, avoiding the rigid fixed caps and vague subjective standards that made prior drafts difficult to enforce. A framework grounded in objective, measurable criteria — consistent with what MassDEP itself is now moving toward at the state level — serves Watertown residents far better.

Thank you for the considerable effort your committee has invested in this work. I hope the ordinance moves forward, and that Watertown finally has a noise framework equal to the reality of how our

neighborhoods actually sound and feel.

Respectfully,
Annette Farrell
59 Union Street
Watertown, MA”

“Dear Rules and Ordinances Committee,

I attended Tuesday’s meeting and want to thank Doug for his thorough work on the noise ordinance draft. While his due diligence is clear, I am concerned that some discussion points will expand the draft in ways that may make it more restrictive than necessary. I hope it was an attempt to ensure a comprehensive review. To remain functional, the ordinance needs to be adjusted for realism rather than further expansion.

I rushed home after the meeting to test Councilor Gannon’s 50-foot "buffer" proposal. My measurements show that 50 feet consistently crosses property lines: reaching neighbors' backyards across the street and the middle of adjacent houses, as well as my backyard. In a dense area like C-9, this distance isn't a buffer, but trespassing, and potentially dangerous.

If smoke detectors go off, any neighbor could likely file a legitimate noise complaint. In a multi-family like mine, someone is always tripping it, and repeatedly in a short period. I am now looking into alarms that are less likely to trip. However, residents might disarm them to avoid fines or trespassers. In dense areas like ours, this is a major fire risk. It would be prudent to consult the Fire Department and consider exempting detectors or increasing the threshold to 100 feet (roughly two houses away) for realism.

Regarding tonal noise, I appreciate the Health Department’s commitment to securing the proper equipment, training, and annual calibration. These are the essential prerequisites needed for effective enforcement. Councilor Fletner’s insights on the harm caused by tonal noise were also very helpful. I look forward to the Department’s analysis on whether the enforcement threshold should be 3 dBA or 5 dBA above ambient levels.

Even though the discussion never got to leaf blowers and HVAC systems, I think they belong elsewhere. I agree with the City Manager that leaf blowers are primarily an energy issue; however, I recommend implementing a grace period alongside city-funded incentives or noise-reduction attachments. For residents aiming to eliminate or reduce their usage, it is only fair that they contribute to the solution through tax-based support.

Meanwhile, commercial HVAC units present complex structural and land-use challenges that are best managed by our planning and zoning boards. As Councilor Gannon noted, from his experience, these boards are in the business of addressing these systems. This is not merely a noise concern; it involves critical factors such as materials, coverage, clearance, and accessibility. Poorly conceived enclosures can cause severe operational failures. Restricted airflow leads to overheating, spikes in energy consumption, and the risk of voiding manufacturer warranties. These units are precision engineered for open-air

operation, any structural screening must strictly adhere to specific clearances to ensure proper heat rejection. Moving forward, these technical and safety requirements should be comprehensively addressed through a more robust mitigation plan during the Site Plan review process.

The discussion briefly addressed fleeting noise and amplification. A sensible filter in which any noise exceeding decibel or tonal limits is sustained for 20 to 30 minutes before action should be the standard. This timeframe accounts for the practical travel time required for enforcement to reach a location. It is equally important that these standards remain source-neutral to prevent subjective enforcement. Regarding amplification, while signal strength can be measured technically, the "plainly audible" standard within established limits is a practical benchmark that I believe reflects Councilor Feltner's comments.

The discussion never touched upon filing a complaint. Please consider the following. To ensure accountability and prevent harassment, we need a transparent process for managing complaints. For example, requiring that all reports be filed within 48 hours and include the reporter's name, the specific source, location, date, and a formal signature to trigger an investigation may prove beneficial. To discourage false reporting, the department should maintain logs to identify patterns of unfounded complaints. Additionally, requiring corroboration from multiple households would ensure that enforcement remains objective and fair.

When the discussion got to the matter of vibration, the noise ordinance began to lose practicality. The proposal to add vibration limits to the noise ordinance, whether as a section or a standalone rule, risks compromising practicality and balance. As Councilor Feltner and the Health Department have highlighted, measurement is very difficult; implementing such a standard would require specialized training, expensive equipment, and likely a dedicated consultant for every project. Beyond the lack of established regulatory standards, vibration is characterized by high variability. Vibrations travel through diverse mediums (such as soil, sand, clay, etc.), and as a result measurements exhibit low predictability and inconsistent impact.

Furthermore, such a restriction could trigger significant ADA concerns. For the Deaf community, vibration is not a nuisance but a vital sensory substitute for sound, aiding in safety, communication, and social participation. A friend, a former audiologist, explained that the brain's auditory cortex can process tactile information as a replacement for lost auditory input, effectively allowing individuals to "hear" through these physical signals. Adopting these standards would be unreasonable for our community. And the thought of issuing citations merely to fund the hiring of a vibration consultant could be seen as rent-seeking. We must prioritize practicality over technical overreach and adoption does not do that.

Finally, Ms. Pruitt is not a resident. Nor is she an expert in engineering, architecture, or economics, yet she is wielding influence over Watertown's Noise Ordinance. After the Nonantum residents were 'rightfully' silenced during the Columbus Delta debate, her treatment has the appearance of impropriety.

This isn't a renaming ceremony; it's a policy that jeopardizes our culture, safety, and local economy. The council decides policy but residents elect the council. If she isn't residing in Watertown, her opinions should be discounted accordingly.

We cannot sacrifice Watertown's community vibrancy for a sterile, over-regulated environment that penalizes residents for simply living their lives. Our noise ordinance needs to be **measurable, balanced, and practical**. It must account for the reality of our city's layout, high density, and economic viability. If we fail to protect our diverse culture and demographics, we aren't 'protecting the peace', we are choking the soul of our city.

Thank you,

Rita"

Dear Councilors,

"Thank you for your ongoing work to update Watertown's noise ordinance. I am writing to highlight two potential loopholes in the currently proposed draft ([link](#)) regarding the accumulation of noise and its long-term impact on our neighborhoods.

1. The Compounding Effect of Increases in Ambient Noise

The noise from several buildings in town has been an ongoing topic of discussion, including several letters published by Watertown News (below):

- [Industrial Noise Pollution from Watertown Impacting Newton Neighbors](#)
- [Noise from Buildings in Watertown Drowning Out Charles River](#)

While it's unclear whether any of the buildings mentioned are in violation of the existing noise ordinance, I think we can agree that their impact on quality of life should be considered. Further, if a *new* development were to *double* the loudness of those areas *above that already* experienced, that would certainly be concerning - yet, that's exactly what our ordinance allows.

Under the proposed ordinance (95.03.A), "*any activity... which creates or produces sound measured at 10 dbA above ambient noise level*" is prohibited. However, because 10 decibels represents a tenfold increase in sound intensity - which we humans perceive as approximately twice as loud - this allowance creates a compounding problem. It permits each new development to be twice as loud as the existing (ambient) baseline. Consequently, the next development can then be twice as loud as the newly raised baseline, allowing ambient noise to steadily snowball out of control without technically breaking the rules.

During the Broder approval process (former Cannistraro lot), sound levels were a constant concern. It became clear then that developers will adhere strictly to Watertown's regulations as written, but they will not voluntarily hold themselves to quieter standards. If we rely solely on a relative +10 dBA limit, several such developments could drastically and permanently alter a neighborhood's noise profile.

Proposed Solution: Other municipalities address this issue by defining maximum sound levels for subject areas (for example, Table 8.16.060E in [Cambridge's Noise Control Ordinance, linked](#)). I urge the committee to recommend such a table to be utilized alongside the proposed 10dba limit - allowing a relative increase only provided it does not exceed the absolute limits expressed in the table.

TABLE 8.16.060E
 TABLE OF ZONING DISTRICT NOISE STANDARDS
 Maximum Allowable Octave Band Sound Pressure Levels

Octave Band Center Frequency Measurement (Hz)	Residential Area		Residential in Industrial		Commercial Area	Industry Area
	Daytime	Other Times	Daytime	Other Times	Anytime	Anytime
31.5	76	68	79	72	79	83
63	75	67	78	71	78	82
125	69	61	73	65	73	77
250	62	52	68	57	68	73
500	56	46	62	51	62	67
1,000	50	40	56	45	56	61
2,000	45	33	51	39	51	57
4,000	40	28	47	34	47	53
8,000	38	26	44	32	44	50
Single Number Equivalent (dB(A))	60	50	65	55	65	70

2. Aggregate Noise from Multiple Sources on a Single Lot/Site

I am also concerned that the current phrasing could allow total noise from a single site to exceed the threshold if multiple, distinct activities on that lot are measured individually. Because the proposed ordinance limits "any activity" to +10 dBA over ambient, a developer could argue (for example) that HVAC noise and manufacturing noise are two distinct activities. If both produce a +9 dBA increase, the aggregate noise emitted from the property would exceed the intended limit, even though the individual "activities" technically comply.

Proposed Solution: A simple fix would be to amend the language from "any activity..." to instead read: "any activity or combination of activities on a single lot..."

Thanks in advance for your consideration,

Sincerely,

George Skuse

43 Pilgrim Rd

c: (617) 319-1865

Municipal employee; all comments are my own personal opinions and not made on behalf of another.

URLs for the embedded links:"

1. <https://watertownma.portal.civicclerk.com/event/9462/files/attachment/5562>
2. <https://www.watertownmanews.com/2023/10/10/letter-industrial-noise-pollution-from-watertown-impacting-newton-neighbors/>
3. <https://www.watertownmanews.com/2026/04/21/letter-noise-from-buildings-in-watertown-drowning-out-charles-river/>
4. https://library.municode.com/ma/cambridge/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=TIT8HESA_CH8.16NOCO_8.16.050GEPRNODI

"Dear Nicole,

Thank you for your quick response. Absolute noise limits differentiated by time-of-day and impacted district class (residential vs. commercial/industrial) seem very common. I've included relevant sections of ordinances from [Belmont](#), [Somerville](#), and [Billerica](#) below (in addition to [Cambridge](#)). There are many others across the state (and nation), I just stopped at three (...*limited time*...).

I've highlighted some interesting nuances of each:

- **Stricter Standards:** Belmont and Billerica limit sound levels to 5 dB over background (rather than our proposed +10 dB). Since +10 dB is perceived as a *doubling* of volume, a +5 dB limit provides a more reasonable "buffer" for residents.
- **Duration-Based Limits:** Somerville recognizes that a noise is more disruptive the longer it lasts, setting lower decibel caps for sounds lasting over 2 hours.

- **Protected Areas:** Belmont and Billerica extend residential-level protections to cemeteries, houses of worship, and open spaces - recognizing that these "quiet zones" are essential.
- **Aggregate Noise Solution:** By measuring total noise at the complainant's property line (as seen in Belmont and Billerica), these ordinances naturally account for "aggregate noise" from a site rather than looking at individual "activities".

Additionally, Somerville includes vibrations in their sound ordinance:

"Vibration perception threshold shall mean the minimum ground, or structure, borne vibration motion necessary to cause a normal person to be aware of the vibration by such direct means as, but not limited to, sensation by touch or visual observation of moving objects.

(17) Vibration. Operating or permitting the operation of any device that creates vibration which is above the vibration perception threshold of an individual at or beyond the property boundary of the source if on private property or at 50 feet from the source if on a public space or public right-of-way."

If we're to continue to welcome and encourage redevelopment of our city's underutilized industrial and commercial properties, it's important for our noise ordinance to keep pace by providing meaningful protections for the abutting neighborhoods' quality of life. As you're revising the ordinance, please consider all of the underlined ideas (above).

Thanks again for all you do.

Sincerely,

George Skuse

43 Pilgrim Rd

c: (617) 319-1865

Municipal employee; all comments are my own personal opinions and not made on behalf of another.

PS: I've pasted content from several disparate sources; please refer to the original documents for clarity and context

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Belmont

<https://ecode360.com/27111806#27111825>

§ 60-610 Designated noise zones.

The properties hereinafter described are hereby assigned to the following noise zones:

A.

Noise Zone I: All residential properties and the grounds of any school, hospital or similar health care institution, house of worship or library while the same is in use, and any Cemetery or Open Space subdistrict.

B.

Noise Zone II: All other properties.

§ 60-615 Exterior noise standards.

A.

It shall be unlawful for any person at any location within the area of the Town to create any loud noise, or to allow the creation of any noise, on property owned, leased, occupied or otherwise controlled by such person, which causes the sound level when measured on any other property to exceed the greater of:

(1)

The maximum allowable exterior sound level outlined in Table I; or

(2)

Five dB over the background sound level.

Table I, Maximum Allowable Exterior Sound Level

Noise Zone	Daytime Level 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.	Nighttime Level 10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.
I	55 dBA	45 dBA
II	65 dBA	60 dBA

B.

If the intruding noise source is continuous and cannot reasonably be discontinued or stopped for a time period whereby the background sound level can be determined, the measured sound level obtained while the source is in operation shall be compared directly to the maximum allowable exterior sound level outlined in Table I.

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Sec. 9-117. Noise levels.

It shall be unlawful to make, continue, or cause to be made or continued, any noise in excess of the noise levels set forth in subsection (1) unless such noise is reasonably necessary to the preservation of life, health, safety or property.

1. (1)

Measurement of noise. Any activity, not expressly exempted by this section, which creates or produces sound, regardless of frequency, exceeding the ambient noise levels at the property line of any property, or if a condominium or apartment house, within any adjoining apartment, above the ambient noise levels as designated in the following table, at the time and place and for the duration then mentioned, shall be deemed to be a violation of this article, but the following enumeration shall not be deemed to be exclusive:

<i>Duration of Sound</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>
	7 AM – 6 PM (all districts)	6 PM – 10 PM (residential districts)	10 PM – 7 AM (residential districts)
		6 PM – 7 AM (all other districts)	
Less than 10 minutes	75 db	70 db	60 db
Between 10 minutes and 2 hours	70 db	60 db	50 db
In excess of 2 hours	60 db	50 db	40 db

2. (2)

In determining whether a particular sound exceeds the maximum permissible sound level in the table set out in subsection (1):

a. a.

Sounds in excess of the residential district limitations as measured in a residential district are violations of this section whether the sound originates in a residential district or any other district.

b. b.

During all hours of Sundays and state and federal holidays, the maximum allowable decibel levels for residential districts are as set forth in column III of the table

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Billerica

<https://billerica.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/General-By-Laws-Updated-10-2023-1.pdf>

23.3 Designated Noise Zones. The properties hereinafter described are hereby assigned to the following noise zones:

NOISE ZONE I: All properties utilized as residential uses in accordance with the Town of Billerica Zoning By-Laws and the grounds of any school, hospital or similar health care institution, house of worship or library while the same is in use, and any Cemetery or Open Space.

NOISE ZONE II: All other property used in accordance with the Town’s Zoning By-Law.

23.4 Exterior Noise Standards: It shall be unlawful for any person at any location within the area of the Town to create any loud noise, or to allow the creation of any noise, on property owned, leased, occupied or otherwise controlled by such person, which causes the sound level when measured on complainant's property to exceed the greater of:

- A. The maximum allowable exterior sound level outlined in Table I; or
- B. Five dB over the background sound level.

Table 1.

Table 1. Maximum Allowable Exterior Sound Level		
	Daytime level	Nighttime level
Noise Level	7:00AM to 10:00 PM	10:00PM to 7:00AM
I	60 dBA	50 dBA
II	70 dBA	65 dBA

If the intruding noise source is continuous and cannot reasonably be discontinued or stopped for a time period whereby the background sound level can be determined, the measured sound level obtained while the source is in operation shall be compared directly to the maximum allowable exterior sound level outlined in Table I. “

“Hi Nicole, Lisa, and John,

First, John, I sent you a message about a remark you made regarding Watertown’s ability to control this activity in industrial and commercial areas. I was (finally) able to locate your remark in the R&O meeting on January 27, 2025, so I’m all set now, but any further knowledge you can add to this would be appreciated.

The gist of your comment is that we, as a City, are not allowed to put restrictions on this activity per State law. Our only recourse is to ask these folks to be reasonable when they schedule pickup times. However, they don’t have to comply.

Here’s a question for all of you to consider going forward with the noise ordinance process:

You can’t control these trucks’ comings and goings, but don’t they have to abide by our noise standards while doing their work?? That may be the way to modify some of this late night/early morning activity that is so disruptive to our residents.

I encourage you all to think about this as you craft the new ordinance.

Thanks again for all of the effort you are exerting on our behalves!

Linda”