

To: Chairman Abney and Honorable Members of the Rhode Island House Committee on Finance

From: Cindy Larson Moura, 6 Barneyville Road, Barrington, RI 02806; co-owner of [Prickly Ed's Cactus Patch Native Plant Emporium](#), a subsidiary of Borderline Ventures LLC, a majority woman owned Rhode Island small business working to promote practices that foster a more resilient Rhode Island.

Date: May 2, 2024

RE: Written Testimony Neutral with Comments for Consideration RE:

RI H7495, 2025 BATTERY-POWERED LEAF BLOWER PILOT REBATE AND EDUCATION PROGRAM

Testimony:

Honorable committee members. I am sorry that I cannot be with you today, as an East Bay, RI small business owner I am sure you can appreciate that my schedule did not allow me to break free, but I appreciate the opportunity to submit comments in writing. Thank you for your time, your service to our State and your commitment to doing what is right for the long-term wellbeing of Rhode Island, its residents, and its future generations. Three years ago, the [Act on Climate](#) bill, introduced by Representative Lauren Carson passed, building upon the Resilient Rhode Island Act of 2014 by toughening emission reduction targets and adding accountability to make sure the state's emission goals are met by 2050. Representative Carson called the bill "the most important environmental legislation to emerge from the General Assembly in the last 25 years." And went on to say "The Act on Climate is a meaningful promise to our children that we will not continue destroying the earth they are inheriting," I applaud Rep Carson's vision and the Assembly's commitment to the only viable future for our state and future generations. To be viable into the future our state needs a strong economy, and it also needs a livable environment.

If the committee is to be honest and thoughtful about the concrete steps the State must take to achieve its climate goals, it is fundamentally required to tackle head on the things that are [irrefutably shown to be significant contributors to emissions](#). Each day across our state many of our neighborhoods are quite literally under attack by a barrage of equipment that is horrific for the environment, the climate and the wellbeing of residents themselves. And yet, year - after year - after year our leaders look the other way taking no steps whatsoever to make moves to better protect residents, or our state's viable future.

The discussion of how to address the growing problem of the noise and pollution blanketing Rhode Island's communities is not new. But more than discussion is needed. The dialogue brings to mind a profound quote from the immensely powerful 1962 book "Silent Spring" by Rachel Carlson which reads "Why should we tolerate a diet of weak poisons, a home in insipid surroundings, a circle of acquaintances who are not quite our enemies, the noise of motors with just enough relief to prevent insanity." Imagine what Ms. Carson would think of Rhode Island's neighborhoods today where there is barely ever relief from the non-stop assault of equipment that spews toxins into the air, shakes homes with its power, degrades the topsoil that holds our state together and terrorizes people, pets, and wild creatures with incessant noise in excess of 90 decibels - hour after hour day after day. Why is this an issue for our House Committee on Finance? Because a livable, viable future with an intact environment is the very root of a strong economy for our State.

I am writing today in strong favor of the allocation of both financial and human resources to address head on the issue of the havoc being wreaked on the state by the mow and blow industry but in opposition to one cent of taxpayer dollars going to incentive or in any way support an industry that is causing so much harm and that frankly grows more egregious with each season.

It is estimated that gas powered lawn equipment equates to at least 12% of total carbon emissions and as much as 45% of non-road emissions. Gasoline powered equipment is growing larger, more powerful and more polluting all the time and it is not at all uncommon in suburban neighborhood – like my own – to have upwards of 6-10 pieces of this equipment running simultaneously for hours at a time day after day to the point that you cannot breathe or even walk outside. The equipment is typically one of two types: two-stroke or four-stroke engine. To fuel this equipment, it takes about 800 million gallons of gasoline annually, with 17 million additional gallons spilled in the process. Two-stroke engines pose a unique environmental hazard because they do not have an independent lubricant system, so fuel and oil are mixed. Due to this, about 30 percent of the fuel does not combust completely, thus releasing toxic gases into the air. A 2014 study examined the VOC (combination of harmful gases) emissions of two stroke scooters, and it was found that the levels of emissions were 124 times higher from an idling scooter than from a car or truck. Four stroke engines are also used in some equipment, and while they are slightly more environmentally efficient, in total, they are also harmful. A four-stroke lawnmower operating for one hour equates to a vehicle traveling for 500 miles. The issue of gas-powered equipment is frequently laughed off by our leaders – disregarded as insignificant in the scope of the state's multitude of growing challenges. Permanently destroying the topsoil of our state, spewing pollutants into the air non-stop, engaging in practices that poison our Bay, making it impossible for dwindling numbers of vital pollinators and songbirds to survive while also making the state nearly unlivable for those residents who care about a resilient future for our communities is no small matter. And it is an insult to educated taxpayers who are concerned about the future viability of our State to treat it as such.

If the above reasons were not enough to incentivize action, let's not forget the noise. One of the most widely used and noxious pieces of lawn equipment is the gas-powered leaf blower. Which is not only virtually unnecessary given that our own Division of Fish and Wildlife encourages the practice of leaving the leaves, essential for maintaining soil health and vital biodiversity, but creates undo noise pollution in neighborhoods across our state all hours of the day and all days of the week. Noise interferes with communication, sleep, and work. The U.S. EPA says noise degrades quality of life by impairing communication and social interaction; reducing the accuracy of work, particularly complex tasks; and creating stressful levels of frustration and aggravation that last even when the noise has ceased. I have a professional sound meter used previously for work in Rhode Island's schools to help leaders make environmental adjustments that brought sound levels down to those that allowed for sufficient concentration and well-being. In my suburban yard (which is nearly an acre) I am routinely being subjected to noise at over 90 decibels sustained – at times for hours. My ability to work and run a business is being greatly impacted by this and yet, somehow this is seen as a fringe issue? No – it is an economic issue and one our House Finance Committee should be concerned about. Where is the protection for my business? For my well-being? Why in all conversations to date regarding the widespread egregious use of overpowered gas equipment is the focus on mow and blow and tree

mangling businesses that choose to bring harm to our state and its residents? That is an affront to the actual growing "green" industry in the state.

Increasingly people live, work, and attend school at home. Shouldn't they be entitled to do so in an environment free from excessive, unnecessary or offensive noise levels. The average blower measures 70-75 dB at 50 feet according to a manufacturer's own lobbyist. The World Health Organization recommends general daytime outdoor noise levels not exceed 55 dB. Further, acoustics experts say blower noise is especially irritating because of its particular pitch, the changing amplitude, and the lack of control by the hearer. Leaf blowers are routinely used less than 50 feet from pedestrians and neighboring homes that may be occupied by home workers, retirees, day sleepers, children, the ill or disabled, and pets, none of whom have consented to the assault of this noise. And for those who care about the environment – which frankly we all should – this noise is having devastating effects on wildlife, especially songbirds who our own Audubon Society have alerted us are declining at alarming rates. How is any of this acceptable on any level?

Rhode Island is also a State that professes to care about the people who work here. And yet, where are the protections for the crews of these "Mow and Blow" landscaping companies? Crew members who are often seasonal, low paid and people of color. [Reports from](#) the Environmental Protection Agency have found that gas-powered lawn and garden equipment, including leaf blowers, release a slew of dangerous particulate matter and volatile organic compounds, including benzene and acetaldehyde. The toxins released by these machines' small engines lead to long-term health problems. According to sources [compiled by anti-leaf blower advocates](#) in Portland, Oregon, the toxins expose workers to toxins that are carcinogenic and can cause respiratory problems, while their noise can cause hearing damage to users. Allowing workers to use these poisonous machines is inconsistent with any claim to preserving worker protection and safety. One day while leaving the city of Providence I was behind a landscaping truck well known here in the East Bay – the truck stopped and idled – in the middle of multiple lanes of traffic to allow the black and brown crew members to leap out of the back of the truck to run off into the neighborhoods – I was too stunned in the moment to get the video I wish I had to share with you. These are the businesses you propose to direct my tax dollars to - unacceptable.

If any other industry were routinely polluting, making communities nearly unlivable, and putting workers in harms way I am confident that the discussion would be centered on regulating and addressing it, not on giving incentives. So, what's up? In my hometown a battery leaf blower incentive program was enacted. The result – a neighbor got a free battery leaf blower to blow off his sidewalk every day in between the paid crew coming weekly with multiple pieces of gas-powered equipment. An egregious allocation of tax dollars if I have ever seen one. It is not hard to see that this proposal while incredibly well intentioned would yield similarly absurd results.

Finally, the exclusive focus on conversion from gas powered to battery powered fails to in any way address the real question. Why are we mowing and blowing so much in the first place? It is terrible for the environment and is taking us down a pathway to an unlivable future. Let's get serious about the questions and serious about the solutions!

Again, I reiterate, I support, strongly and vehemently, action by our legislature to begin to enact educational programs and regulations as needed that take back our communities from the scourge of the mow and blow industry. I do not, however, support the notion of directing even one penny of taxpayer money towards Rhode Island's existing mow and blow industry. That would be an egregious use of taxpayer dollars. This industry, who often refer to themselves as landscapers but most assuredly are not, have demonstrated time and again through their words and even more so through their actions an acute lack of interest in doing what is right. If they had any interest in being educated in resilient landscaping practices that would already be happening through their trade association as is the case in neighboring states. But it is not. The dollars proposed in the bill you are considering today would, in my well-informed opinion, go entirely to waste. And as a state we do not have a single dollar to waste! I instead urge you to consider better ways that these dollars might be spent, Here are just a few examples of possible ways these dollars could be better allocated:

- Educational programs for homeowners on what resilient landscapes look like and how they can and should be maintained with resources developed by informed experts at DEM, URI, Save the Bay, the Audubon and other science centered organizations.
- Educational programs – perhaps infomercials – targeted at homeowners to empower them to push a mower and pick up a rake – like nearly all of us did for decades before. It is good for the environment, good for your health and a great way to meet a neighbor on a now quiet weekend afternoon.
- Incentives for property owners to engage in resilient – Bay friendly – environmentally friendly landscaping practices, other states have begun doing this with great success.
- Funding for cities and towns to transition to and model more resilient landscaping practices and to launch resident programs to encourage the same.
- Incentives for businesses that demonstrate a commitment to supporting healthy landscapes.
- Programs and incentives for new businesses to form and grow to meet the needs of property owners who want to hire professionals to use rakes or battery/ human powered equipment.
- Green futures training programs for the workers of these mow and blow companies to help prepare them for the jobs of the future. The practices of these companies are not the fault of the workers who are victims as well. These workers deserve support that moves them into the healthy, viable careers of the future.

The issue of gas-powered lawn equipment is most frequently heard by the House Committee on the Environment. But this truly is an economic issue. There is no viable economic future for Rhode Island without a working environment, without a clean Bay and without businesses who are all-in on supporting the robust climate actions that will be needed to sustain our state into the future. Let's think of creative ways to bolster those businesses whose focus is centered around creating a resilient Rhode Island. **In closing, please consider an allocation of resources, but please reconsider the way those funds are directed to produce meaningful impacts for Rhode Island.**

Thank you again for your time and your service. I am always available to talk further with anyone interested in brainstorming real and meaningful ways to make Rhode Island a better place to live, work and do business. We don't need baby steps on big issues we need adult steps and science backed solutions.