

March 11, 2024

To: Chair Craven & the Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee

Re: H 7368

I submit this written testimony in opposition to the proposed legislation which aims to equip cities throughout the state with acoustic cameras to enforce noise limits on motor vehicles.

When advocating for noise cameras recently, Mayor Brett Smiley said: "noise is one of the top constituent complaints."¹ Considering the fact that 72% of Providence residents live in majority-minority and under-resourced communities,² it is hard to believe that noise is a primary concern for anyone *except* relatively rich white folks.

The notion of 'noise pollution' is – at bottom – a racist dog whistle. Studies show that neighborhoods with 75% black residents have night-time noise levels that are a whopping 4 decibels higher than neighborhoods without black residents.³ Black drivers are 3x more likely than white drivers to receive tickets for loud music.⁴ Black people and other minorities are significantly more likely to work rotating evening shifts than white workers – who are more likely to work traditional day shifts.⁵ So, when the City of Providence is seeking to crack down on "loud music in the wee hours"⁶ – we know which populations are *really* being targeted.

When speaking more in-depth about 'noise pollution', Mayor Smiley stated: "we think it [installation of noise cameras] will improve *the quality of life* in our neighborhoods."⁷ However, the Port of Providence is "impacted by air pollution from diesel trucks, marine vessels, oil and gas storage and distribution, asphalt and

¹ See: <https://turnto10.com/news/local/providence-considers-noise-cameras-to-curb-loud-noise-issue-southern-new-england-rhode-island-february-1-2024>

² See: <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/2020/11/16/providence-ranks-highly-among-u-s-cities-concentrated-poverty/6315197002/>

³ See: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/urban-noise-pollution-worst-poor-minority-neighborhoods-segregated-cities>

⁴ See: <https://www.wusf.org/transportation/2023-05-02/stop-being-racist-tickets-loud-music-3-times-likely-black-drivers>

⁵ See: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10192004/>

⁶ See again: <https://turnto10.com/news/local/providence-considers-noise-cameras-to-curb-loud-noise-issue-southern-new-england-rhode-island-february-1-2024>

⁷ See: <https://www.wpri.com/news/local-news/providence/smiley-wants-to-install-technology-to-target-excessive-noise-in-providence/>

cement processing, metals recycling, natural gas and utility service, and large heating plants".⁸ Those living closest to the Port of Providence tend to be impoverished people of color, who may lack formal naturalization documentation, speak a language other than English, have criminal records, and/or identify as LGBTQIA+. ⁹ What about *this* quality of life? Against this backdrop of actual air pollution, it is hard to believe that vrooming engines and loud music is a primary concern for anyone *except* relatively rich white folks.

When we strip the concept of "the quality of life" down to its bare bones, it is another racist dog whistle. Put simply: 'quality' is that which is desirable in the eyes of relatively rich whites, and the 'life' that matters most is the one that is relatively rich and white. Everyone else is – to varying degrees – considered '*lives that are unworthy of life*'.¹⁰ The proposed law aims to expand the current police state, and is thus irredeemably racist and classist.

The structures of racism and poverty have yet to be addressed by the State beyond mere lip service. Adding insult to injury is the fact that the cost of living is unaffordable for most people¹¹ – but Mayor Smiley has consistently opposed rent control measures.¹² At the same time, Providence has undergone gentrification more and more over the past few decades. The East Side – which was once a neighborhood of working-class Cape Verdeans – is now little more than dormitories and satellite campuses for Brown University, the Rhode Island School of Design, and Johnson & Wales University.¹³

The relationship between Mayor Smiley, Brown University, and real estate in Providence is concerning. It is a fact that Mayor Smiley's husband – James "Jim" DeRentis – has consistently been recognized as one of 'America's Best Realtors.' ¹⁴ According to his very own business website, Jim has been "an avid real estate investor for over 35 years, having bought, sold, and developed over two dozen properties largely on the City's [Providence] East and West Sides."¹⁵

⁸ See: <https://dem.ri.gov/environmental-protection-bureau/air-resources/air-toxics-monitoring-port-providence>

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_unworthy_of_life

¹¹ See: <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/25/1225957874/housing-unaffordable-for-record-half-all-u-s-renters-study-finds>

¹² See: <https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2024/02/skyrocketing-rents-drive-stabilization-proposal>

¹³ See: <https://www.browndailyherald.com/article/2022/04/gentrification-and-displacement-in-providence-urban-renewal-economic-markets-historic-preservation>

¹⁴ See: <https://www.loopnet.com/commercial-real-estate-brokers/profile/jim-derentis/9kfzcs5b>

¹⁵ *ibid*

Brown University purchased Smiley and DeRentis' home on the East Side of Providence in 2017 for more than \$1 million.¹⁶ There are several conflicts of interest and likely ethical violations involved here. Brown University has successfully evaded paying property taxes to the City of Providence for ages; but the Smiley Administration recently reached a deal with Brown and other nearby institutions of higher learning that grant far too many concessions. This deal – known as the PILOT Agreement¹⁷ – is a hilariously facile acronym for **P**ayment **I**n **L**ieu **O**f **T**axes.

An alarming part of this agreement is the creation of a "bi-monthly *quality of life* working group where City Departments and the institutions will work together to address *quality of life* concerns reported by neighbors and other issues and concerns of common interest raised by the City and the institutions".¹⁸ Once again, the City is invoking the dog whistle of "quality of life" as shorthand for what is desirable for relatively rich whites.

Sadly, the gentrification process continues to receive the green light from those in power today. The City Plan Commission just approved another redevelopment project in the Mount Hope area last month.¹⁹ Projects branded with words like 'urban renewal', or 'revitalization', or 'redevelopment' are coded language for the fumigation of poor people of color from the city – to make room for relatively rich whites.

When we put the puzzle pieces together, the picture is clear: **the proposed law would disproportionately impact poor black and brown people** – *the same invisible populations that are relegated to the most toxic area of the city; the same hyper-visible populations that are already most likely to be targets of state surveillance and violence; and the same populations that gentrification is slowly but surely pushing out.* This is not a coincidence – this is how the structures of white supremacy/anti-blackness and capitalism operate.

We must ask ourselves: *why does it appear that poor black and brown people are oh-so enamored with cars that have after-market mufflers and loud stereo systems?* The answer is perhaps existential and psychoanalytic in nature. Black and brown voices have – historically and presently – been outcast from the political, economic, and social realms. Black and brown bodies have – historically and presently – been subject to erasure locally and globally. Under these conditions, being loud or 'noisy' is an effort to reclaim agency. It is an effort to assert one's

¹⁶ See: <https://www.golocalprov.com/news/brown-buying-raimondos-chief-of-staff-and-husbands-home-for-more-than-1-mil>

¹⁷ See: <https://www.providenceri.gov/mayor-brett-smiley-celebrates-passage-of-historic-pilot-agreement/>

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ See: <https://www.golocalprov.com/business/proposed-four-story-58-unit-mt.-hope-development-in-providence-moves-forward>

sense of self in a hostile world that does everything in its power to attack our being. It is an act of rebellion. It is an act of resistance. If – as Xochitl Gonzalez argues – “the sound of gentrification is silence”,²⁰ then the sound of decolonization is a cacophony of ear-splitting noise.

The loud mufflers and booming speakers force the world to confront a reality that it wishes were otherwise: *no matter how much you try to erase us and silence us, we are still **here**, and you are going to **hear** us.*

I urge you to oppose **H 7368**.

Respectfully Submitted,

-Darryl Walker, Jr.

²⁰ “Why Do Rich People Love Quiet?” (2022) by Xochitl Gonzalez. Article available here: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/09/let-brooklyn-be-loud/670600/>