Subject: Support for Sustainable Leaf Management & Prompt Transition to Electric Leaf Blowers

Dear Mayor Gaskins, Vice Mayor Bagley, and City Council members,

We write as advocates for sustainable leaf management, reducing air pollution, and in support of Alexandria's prompt transition from gas-powered to electric leaf blowers. The environmental and economic costs of leaf and grass clipping removal are significant, and we urge the city to adopt more sustainable practices.

## Why Transition to Electric Leaf Blowers & Other Alternatives

Gas-powered leaf blowers have many harmful effects:

- *Air pollution*: They emit high levels of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and fine particulate matter. Using a leaf blower for an hour produces the same pollution as running 15 cars in our neighborhoods for an hour.
- *Health concerns*: Operators and residents are exposed to fine particulates and other carcinogenic toxins, leading to asthma attacks and premature deaths.
- *Harmful, excessive noise* disrupts wildlife and is a health risk for residents and visitors.

Alexandria can align with our Eco-City Charter and lead the way in Virginia by transitioning to electric models, reducing air pollution, and creating a healthier work environment for city staff.

- Montgomery County, MD and Washington, DC, have already banned gas blowers. In DC, while some landscapers initially resisted due to cost and performance concerns, many now report positive experiences with lighter, healthier, more efficient, and cost-effective electric blowers.
- The DC Sustainable Energy Utility offers rebates to offset the cost of new equipment, further encouraging electric blower adoption.

## Rethinking Leaf & Vegetation Removal in Parks & Public Land

We urge the city to reduce unnecessary leaf and grass clipping removal, particularly in parks. Leaves play a vital role in the health of ecosystems and biodiversity. When left on the ground, leaves provide natural mulch, retain soil moisture, suppress weeds, and contribute essential nutrients to the soil as they decompose.

- Allow leaves to remain in wooded and low-traffic areas, reducing costs and enhancing soil and tree health.
- Limit routine blowing of grass clippings and debris from pathways where a pristine aesthetic is unnecessary.

## Alternatives to Leaf Blowers

While electric leaf blowers are cleaner and quieter, they still have environmental costs. We recommend incorporating other cost-efficient approaches to reduce blower reliance:

1. **Leave leaves & grass clippings in natural areas wherever possible.** *Mowing over* leaves and/or using mulching mowers will cut them into small pieces so they can get into the ground and increase soil fertility.
2. **Leaf sweepers**: Push or tow-behind models offer a quieter, non-polluting method for leaf collection while reducing labor efforts.
3. **Manual tools:** Rakes and brooms offer zero emissions, minimal maintenance, and precise collection.

## Recommended Actions

1. **Educate residents and businesses** about the ecological benefits of leaf mulching and decomposition. We are eager to collaborate on an education campaign similar to the Northern Virginia Bird Alliance's "Leave the Leaves" initiative and the Falls Church "Leave the Leaves" website.
2. **Adopt a sustainable leaf management policy as soon as possible**, allowing leaves to remain in natural areas and reducing expensive and excessive clearing of grass clippings, leaves, and debris.
3. **Encourage sustainable alternatives** such as raking and leaf mulching, where appropriate.
4. **In 2025, start the phase-out of gas-powered leaf blowers** in Alexandria, aiming for completion by or before the end of 2026, while allowing flexibility as needed**.** Given similar policies in nearby areas, we believe the transition will be manageable. (*See Attachment 1 below for regional details*.)

By embracing these changes, Alexandria can maintain beautiful landscapes while reducing costs and creating a healthier environment for residents and workers. Thank you for considering this important issue. We welcome opportunities to discuss these recommendations and to work toward a more sustainable future for our city.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Trice, Chair, Alexandria Beautification Commission

Marta Schantz, Chair, Environmental Policy Commission

Jerome Cordts, Chair, Public Health Advisory Commission

Dana Robert Colarulli, Chair, Parks and Recreation Commission

Tom Blackburn, Advocacy Committee Chair, Northern Virginia Bird Alliance

Cc: City Manager James Parajon
City Attorney Cheran Ivery

# Attachment 1

Adjacent jurisdictions are in favor of electric alternatives to gas-powered leaf blowers because they reduce pollution and noise.

In Washington, DC, the Leaf Blower Regulation Amendment Act of 2018 took effect on January 1, 2022. The Act prohibits the use of gasoline-powered leaf blowers in the District of Columbia and impacts landscapers who do business in the District, and residents who own gasoline-powered leaf blowers. Companies or individuals that use gasoline-powered leaf blowers in DC are subject to fines of up to $500 for each offense. The DC Sustainable Energy Utility offers rebates to offset the cost of new equipment, further encouraging electric blower adoption.

Montgomery County Maryland has already banned the sale of the devices and will prohibit their use starting July 2025.

Fairfax County ceased purchasing gas blowers in August 2022 and opted exclusively to replace them with electric ones.