

THE 1997 GAS LEAF BLOWER INITIATIVE: A Voter-Approved Mandate Without Action

SUMMARY

In 1997, City of Santa Barbara (City) residents took a clear stand by passing a ballot measure banning gasoline-powered leaf blowers (gas blowers) within city limits. This voter-led and approved mandate reflected a clear community concern, yet decades later, it remains widely disregarded.

Gas blowers generate significant noise and air pollution, posing adverse health effects for both users and bystanders, while also creating an ongoing nuisance for the community. As of 1997, use of gas blowers is illegal within the City.

The City of Santa Barbara Municipal Code (City Code) goes further, banning the sale of electric blowers that do not meet the City's established noise limit of 65 decibels, restricting operational use within 250 ft of residential zones between 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and banning the use entirely on Sundays and national holidays. Furthermore, under the City Code, the Parks and Recreation Department must certify individual blowers annually. In addition, the City Finance Department Business Office must inform businesses using them of the requisite City Code governing their proper use to mitigate the nuisance and adverse health effects associated with inhalation of pollution and debris for the user of the blower and bystanders.

The Santa Barbara County Grand Jury found that enforcement of the City Code relating to leaf blower usage is insufficient. While there have been many citizen complaints, they have not been adequately addressed. The illegal use of gas blowers within the City continues to this day by City staff and other operators, including City contractors and residents. Furthermore, the Grand Jury has identified City departments failing to enforce the City Code. Despite this clear voter-passed mandate, lack of meaningful enforcement has nullified the will of the voters.

The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council (City Council) ensure the City's gas blower ban is fully implemented and enforced. This includes directing City departments to enforce the City Code, establish a consistent process for responding to violations, enforcing compliance in City operations, and making electric leaf blower guidelines accessible to the public and affected businesses.

BACKGROUND

Leaf blowers became commercially widespread in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century. Early handheld blowers evolved from backpack motorized crop sprayers commonly used in agriculture during the 1950s and 1960s. Landscapers and maintenance personnel modified these sprayers by removing the chemical spray component to use solely as an air-blowing device. In 1970, the Japanese manufacturer Echo (Formerly Kioritz Corporation) entered the backpack blower market, contributing to its greater commercialization.¹

Recurring droughts across California resulted in restrictions on using water to clean driveways. This contributed to the rise of the gas blower market. Cities across California began implementing restrictions on leaf blower use, with some jurisdictions banning them outright.²

With the increasing use of leaf blowers in the local community, the City Council adopted Ordinance 4452 in 1987, creating Section 9.16.020 of the City Code. This newly adopted section, titled '*Leafblowers*', established general regulations governing the use of blowers within city limits, including designated areas of operation, permissible hours, and prohibited conduct.

In 1991, the City Council adopted Ordinances 4718 and 4720, further amending Section 9.16.020. These amendments retitled the section 'Leafblowers - Restriction on Use' and expanded regulations. The ordinances imposed additional responsibilities on the City's Parks and Recreation Department and Finance Department. The City also aligned its regulations with the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) noise level standard, recognizing a 65-decibel limit and prohibiting the use and sale of leaf blowers exceeding that threshold. As a result, the Parks and Recreation Department was directed to develop formal operational guidelines which were to be distributed to applicants obtaining a landscaping or gardening business license.

With city efforts to strike a balance between regulation and continued use, many residents felt that more needed to be done to address the nuisance and adverse health effects associated with gas blowers. In 1997, City resident, Ashley Brilliant (1933-2025) led a ballot initiative to prohibit entirely the use of gas blowers within City limits:

¹ <https://www.batteryleafblowers.com/history-leaf-blower/>, accessed May 20, 2026.

² <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-oct-29-me-27606-story.html>, accessed May 20, 2026.

to secure and promote the public health, comfort, safety and welfare, and to protect the rights of its citizens to privacy and freedom from nuisance, it is the purpose of this ordinance to prohibit unnecessary, excessive and annoying noises at levels which are detrimental to the health and welfare of the community, and to minimize airborne dust and pollen.³

After collecting more than 9,000 signatures from local residents, the measure was placed before voters.

In September 1997, the City Council adopted Ordinance 5024, further amending Section 9.16.020. These amendments added restrictions and directed the creation of a certification program through the Parks and Recreation Department. Furthermore, it mandated the City Finance Department Business Office to distribute both the City Code and the City's established blower guidelines to applicants seeking a landscaping or gardening business license.

On November 4, 1997, City residents approved the ballot measure enacting Ordinance 5036, adding Section 9.16.021 to the City Code and prohibiting the use of gas blowers within city limits.

In 2016, the City amended portions of the Noise chapter and renumbered the leaf blower provisions. Sections 9.16.020 and 9.16.021, relating to leaf blower usage, were redesignated as Sections 9.16.050 and 9.16.060.

The Grand Jury examined how the city has implemented its restrictions on leaf blower use and how it enforces its gas blower ban as put forth by the residents of the City.

³ <https://www.ashleighbrilliant.com/leafblowers.html>, accessed May 20, 2026.

METHODOLOGY

In developing this Report, the Grand Jury conducted interviews with key personnel of the following agencies:

- City of Santa Barbara, Public Works Department
- City of Santa Barbara, Sustainability and Resilience Department
- City of Santa Barbara, Police Department
- City of Santa Barbara, Parks and Recreation Department
- City of Santa Barbara, Finance Department
- City of Santa Barbara, Administrator's Office
- City of Santa Barbara, Office of the City Attorney
- Santa Barbara County, Air Pollution Control District

Additionally, the Grand Jury reviewed the Santa Barbara City Municipal Code, literature on the adverse health effects associated with gas blower use, and records received from the referenced agencies.

DISCUSSION

Risks to The Health and Safety of Residents and Non-Compliant Operators

Environmental Pollutants

While the City of Santa Barbara has focused on initiatives that lead the City towards carbon neutrality, continued use of gas blowers throughout the community undermines these goals by producing significant amounts of pollution into the community.⁴ Gas blowers use less efficient two-stroke engines burning a mixture of gasoline and oil, often not equipped with an emissions control device. As a result, the exhaust produces high levels of pollutants that have adverse health effects. Emissions from gas blowers include nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and reactive organic gases (ROG), both of which can produce ozone when exposed to sunlight.^{5,6} Additional pollutants of concern include fine

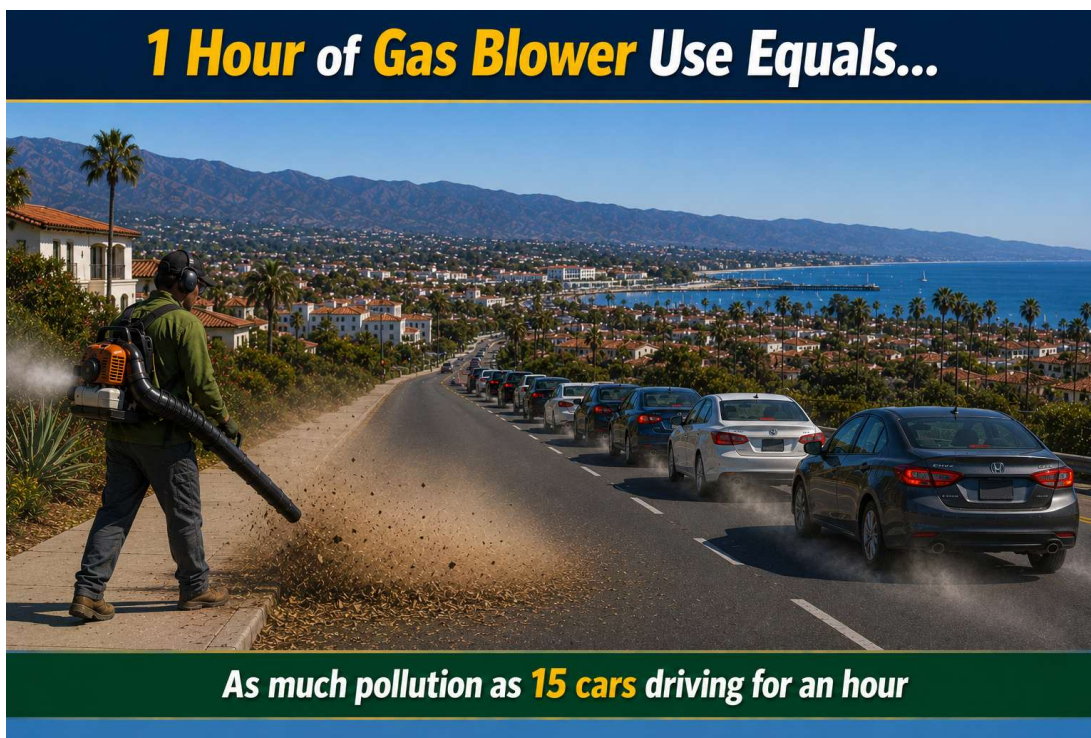
⁴ <https://sustainability.santabarbaraca.gov/programs/climate-action-plan>, accessed May 20, 2026.

⁵ <https://sustainability.wustl.edu/rethinking-lawn-equipment-2/#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20air%20pollution,air%20quality%20and%20human%20health>, accessed May 20, 2026.

⁶ <https://www.ourair.org/leaf-blowers/>, accessed May 20, 2026.

particulate matter. The adverse health effect associated with these pollutants include early death, heart attack, stroke, asthma, and congenital heart failure.⁷ The California Air Resources Board has equated the emissions from one hour operation of two-stroke models to those of an automobile traveling for 15 hours or over 1,000 miles.⁸

**FIGURE 1
ONE HOUR BLOWER USE EQUATES TO
15 CARS DRIVING FOR ONE HOUR**



Noise Pollution

Gas blowers produce intense low-frequency noise, exceeding safe exposure limits, and have negative health effects on the operator and those in close proximity to the source.⁹ While the operator is most susceptible to harm from the noise emission of gas blowers, the low-frequency sound produced can penetrate windows, walls, and travel

⁷ <https://mountsinaiexposomics.org/gas-leaf-blowers-are-health-hazards/>, accessed May 20, 2026.

⁸ <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/fact-sheets/sore-small-engine-fact-sheet>, accessed May 20, 2026.

⁹ <https://ccbirdalliance.org/the-downside-of-gas-powered-leaf-blowers-less-polluting-alternatives/>, accessed May 20, 2026.

greater distances, creating a persistent nuisance for the community during the operation of these devices. A 2015 study published by the National Library of Medicine found that commercial grade gas blowers generate sound levels higher than the ANSI standard level of 65 decibels. Of the three blowers tested, sound levels measured at 50 ft reached 77.6 decibels or higher, well above the recognized ANSI standard.¹⁰

Airborne Debris

While the speed of the propelled air from blowers varies, some can reach up to 200 miles per hour or more.¹¹ Improper use of this equipment can project debris that may contain both biological and chemical pollutants, recirculating it into the community, adversely affecting the health of the operator and nearby residents.¹²

City Use of Gasoline-Powered Leaf Blowers

While the City Code contains no exemption, restrictions on leaf blower use are not universally followed among City staff and contractors. The City of Santa Barbara Public Works Department, particularly the Streets Division and its contractors, use gas blowers for road re-pavement purposes, operating in non-compliance with the City Code. As of the writing of this report, it is the Grand Jury's understanding that the Public Works Department is in the process of phasing out the use of gas blowers. However, the city has been planning to transition to electric blower use for years with no clear timeline showing that this transition is being implemented. While contractors are expected to comply with applicable laws, their use of gas blowers reflects a failure to ensure contractors comply with the City Code.

Enforcement (non-enforcement)

Under the City Code, violations of Chapter 9.16 (*Noise*), including Sections 9.16.050 (*Leaf Blowers – Restrictions on Use*) and 9.16.060 (*Use of Gasoline-Powered Leaf Blowers Prohibited*), are enforceable once verified by either zoning enforcement officers or the Santa Barbara Police Department (SBPD).¹³ In practice, enforcement authority primarily rests with the SBPD, which operates a tiered dispatch system designed to prioritize calls involving immediate threats to life and safety. Leaf blower complaints are categorized as lower-priority calls.

¹⁰ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6707732/>, accessed May 20, 2026.

¹¹ <https://theropshop.com/rugged-u/blog/leaf-blower-tips-cfm-vs-mpm>, accessed May 20, 2026.

¹² <https://mountsinaiexposomics.org/gas-leaf-blowers-are-health-hazards/>, accessed May 20, 2026.

¹³ Santa Barbara Municipal Code § 9.16.110 (Ord. 5740, 2016), accessed May 20, 2026.

Officers are typically not available to respond to a gas blower complaint. By the time an officer becomes available to respond, the non-compliant operator may no longer be present. Response times for these lower-tiered calls vary day-to-day and are dependent on overall calls received by the SBPD.

While enforcement of gas blower violations presents challenges due to the need for a timely response, the City has demonstrated that various short-term targeted enforcement efforts can improve compliance, reduce violations, and give community emphasis that the City Code will be enforced.

In addressing illegal short-term vacation rentals, City Council used an enforcement approach that produced measurable results without requiring permanent staffing.¹⁴ In an attempt to address ongoing non-compliance and the absence of active enforcement, a similar model could be applied for the enforcement of the gas blower ban. A short-term enforcement task force would allow the City to proactively identify and address violations in real time, establishing a visible enforcement presence to signal that the law will be enforced.

As another example, between 1982 and early 1990, Santa Barbara experienced extreme drought conditions leading City Council to implement restrictions on water usage through changes to the City Code. To enforce the new laws around water usage, the City implemented a program in which it tasked two Drought Enforcement Officers to enforce the City Code specific to water usage. The Drought Enforcement Officers were tasked to patrol the streets of Santa Barbara City, looking for residents violating the City Code, issuing warnings for first offenses with further non-compliance resulting in fines.¹⁵

While the City emphasizes education over penalization, this approach has not resulted in compliance with the gas blower ban implemented almost three decades ago. A targeted enforcement effort would create immediate accountability and demonstrate that continued violations of the gas blower ban within the community will not go unaddressed.

¹⁴ <https://www.independent.com/2025/08/04/city-of-santa-barbara-chips-away-at-illegal-short-term-vacation-rentals/>, accessed May 20, 2026.

¹⁵ <https://www.circleofblue.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Demand-Reduction-During-Drought.City-of-Santa-Barbara.pdf>, accessed May 20, 2026.

Sustainability & Resilience Department

The City's Sustainability and Resilience Department (S&R) leads in public education regarding restrictions on leaf blower use. The Department and its code enforcement officers rely on an educational approach when interacting with non-compliant operators.

The Department receives service requests (complaints) submitted through SB Connect, the City's online service request platform. Leaf blower complaints filed through SB Connect are routed to S&R. Although S&R takes the lead on education and outreach, it does not enforce the City Code provisions relating to leaf blower usage.

Despite receiving leaf blower complaints, S&R staff cannot issue citations or take enforcement action. S&R's role is limited to education and obtaining voluntary compliance. While S&R attempts to contact reported violators to provide information about the City Code provisions on leaf blower usage, staffing constraints limit the department's ability to consistently respond to complaints or conduct in-person educational outreach.

Complaints With No Enforcement

The Grand Jury reviewed multiple sources of data to assess how leaf blower complaints are received, tracked, and enforced. This includes SBPD's calls-for-service records, as well as complaints submitted through SB Connect, to better understand reporting avenues and enforcement outcomes.

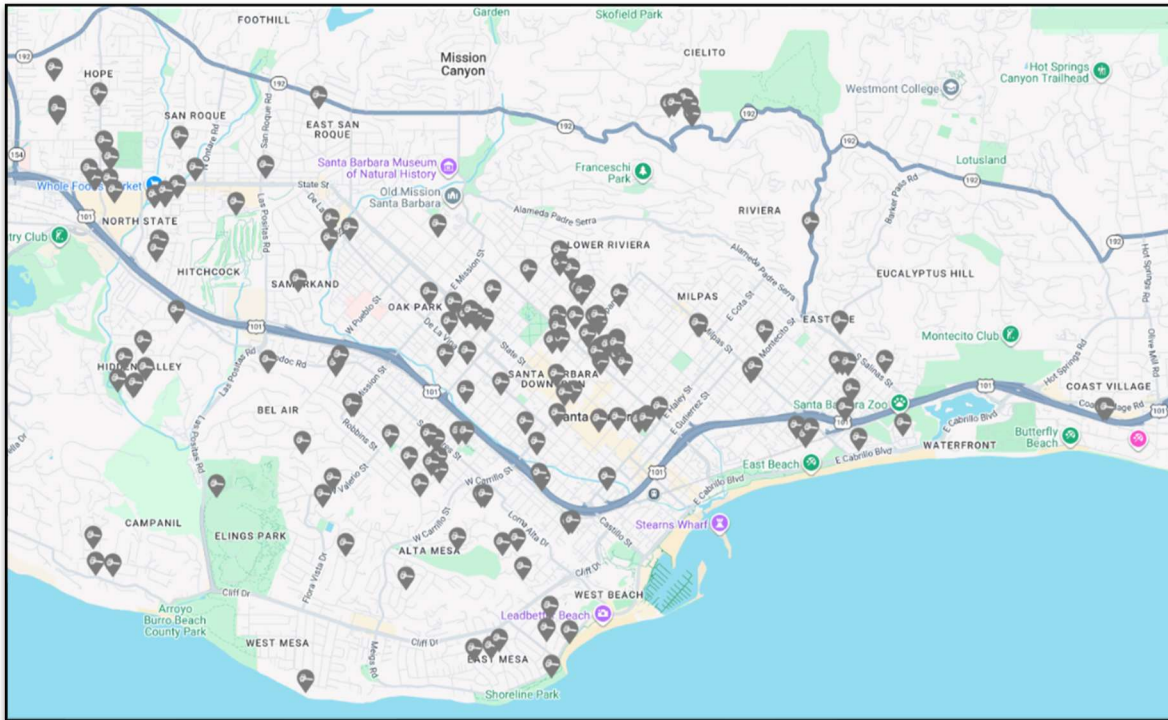
There are two separate intake pathways to submit leaf blower complaints to the SBPD. In practice, no formalized consistent referral process has been adopted between the two, contributing to the lack of enforcement.

The Grand Jury reviewed Santa Barbara Police Department calls-for-service records for leaf-blower related complaints from January 2023 through January 2026. During this period, there were a total of 140 calls-for-service; however, enforcement activity was essentially absent. Most calls resulted in minimal or no action, with outcomes such as gone on arrival, canceled calls, or non-enforcement responses such as 'Be On the Lookout' broadcasts. Overall, the data reflected calls-for-service that did not show meaningful enforcement of the City Code on blower regulations.

The Grand Jury also reviewed SB Connect data concerning leaf blower-related complaints from 2024 through 2025. During this period, a total of 87 complaints were submitted, 43 in 2024, and 44 in 2025. S&R did not forward complaints inputted into SB

Connect to the SBPD for enforcement review. The locations of complaints submitted to SB Connect and SBPD are shown on the map below.

FIGURE 2
MAP OF SB CONNECT AND SBPD LEAF BLOWER COMPLAINT LOCATIONS



SB Connect does not work as an effective enforcement pathway for leaf blower complaints, as the response times do not line up with the immediate nature of these violations. By the time an SB Connect complaint is reviewed and acted upon, non-compliant operators are likely to be gone.

The Grand Jury identified little to no overlap in complaints of records received from SBPD and complaints input into SB Connect.

Parks and Recreation Department

As outlined in Section 9.16.050.F of the City Code, the City Parks & Recreation Director is "... authorized and directed to adopt guidelines for the proper use of leaf blowers, which guidelines shall promote the safe and efficient use of leaf blowers, while also mitigating, to the extent possible, the noise and nuisance effects of leaf blowers...."

While a Parks and Recreation Department pamphlet on leaf blower guidelines does exist, and while it was accessible on the City's website at one point, the Grand Jury was unable to locate it through the City's website searchable pathways. This pamphlet provided simple operational guidelines as outlined in the City Code and emphasized the illegality of gas blowers, but failed to provide information regarding the proper disposal methods of blower debris. The Grand Jury has found that this document is not easily accessible to the public, or those seeking gardening or landscaping business licenses, contributing to non-compliant use within City limits.

In addition, the City Code requires the Parks and Recreation Department to create a certification process for blowers operating within the community. This program is important as not all electric blowers are universally compliant with the City's adopted noise standard. Blowers would meet the certification requirements so long they generated 65 decibels or less, consistent with the American National Standard Institute's (ANSI B175.2-1990) standard for handheld and backpack gas blowers. Through this process, certification stickers would be applied to leaf blowers meeting that standard, and certification would be valid for one year. Operating a blower without a valid certification sticker constitutes an infraction.

Annual certification and information dissemination to operators on the proper use of leaf blowers is vital to ensure leaf blowers are operated safely and in compliance with local law. The Grand Jury has found that no certification program or process exists within the Parks and Recreation Department.

Business Office

The City Code directs the Finance Department to provide a copy of the City noise ordinances (Chapter 9.16) and the leaf blower guidelines to each person that is obtaining a business license to operate a gardening or landscaping maintenance service within the city.

The City of Santa Barbara no longer issues "business licenses," instead issuing "business tax certificates." While terminology may have shifted, the intent of the City Code provision directing the distribution of the Chapter 9.16 and electric blower guidelines remains unchanged.

The Finance Department Business Office has no standardized process requiring the distribution of Chapter 9.16 (Noise) and leaf blower guidelines to those seeking to operate a landscaping or gardening business within city limits.

CONCLUSION

In 1997, the City of Santa Barbara residents made it clear that the use of gas blowers would be prohibited. Yet three decades later, this directive has not meaningfully been honored. Gas blowers continue to be used throughout the city, by City staff and other operators, while the existing complaint and enforcement process fails to adequately address widespread violations. The City must take the steps necessary to enforce the gas blower ban and ensure all leaf blower regulations in the City Code are enforced.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1: The City of Santa Barbara is not enforcing the voter-approved law prohibiting the use of gasoline-powered leaf blowers in the community by allowing continued use by City staff, contractors, and residents in violation of Section 9.16.060 of the City Code.

Recommendation 1: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council fully and effectively enforce Section 9.16.060 of the City Code. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Finding 2: The City of Santa Barbara staff and its contractors are using gasoline-powered leaf-blowers in municipal operations in direct violation of the City Code.
Recommendation 2a: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council direct City staff to comply with Section 9.16.060 of the City Code by ceasing its own use of gasoline-powered leaf blowers in City operations. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Recommendation 2: The Grand Jury recommends that the City of Santa Barbara enforce compliance with section 9.16.060 of the City Code through agreements with its contractors, including prohibiting the use of gasoline-powered leaf blowers in City-contracted operations. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Finding 3: The City of Santa Barbara’s current enforcement model for its gasoline-powered leaf blower ban is not effective and does not result in enforcement of the City Code.

Recommendation 3a: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council develop a proactive enforcement model that ensures immediate response to violations of the City Code, holding non-compliant operators accountable. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Recommendation 3b: The Grand Jury recommends that Santa Barbara City Council create a short-term patrol-based enforcement task force to address violations of the gasoline-powered leaf blower ban and establish a visible enforcement presence. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Finding 4: The Parks and Recreation Department has not made its leaf blower usage guidelines readily accessible, limiting community awareness and resulting in continued noise disturbances, air pollution, and repeated quality of life impacts on residents throughout the community.

Recommendation 4: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council direct the Parks and Recreation Department to make these guidelines readily accessible to the public. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Finding 5: The Parks and Recreation Department has not adopted a leaf blower certification program, resulting in no effective method to identify equipment compliance or non-compliance, in violation of Section 9.16.050.E of the City Code.

Recommendation 5: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council direct the Parks and Recreation Department to adopt a leaf blower certification program, in compliance with the City Code. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

Finding 6: The Finance Department is not providing a copy of Chapter 9.16 of the municipal code and the established Parks and Recreation leaf blower guidelines to each person obtaining a business license (tax certificate) or gardening or landscaping, in violation of Section 9.16.050.F of the City Code.

Recommendation 6: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara City Council direct the Finance Department to provide a copy of Chapter 9.16 of the municipal code and leaf blower guidelines to each person obtaining a business license (tax certificate) for gardening or landscaping, in compliance with the City Code. To be implemented by December 31, 2026.

REQUIREMENTS FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree with an explanation
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with a summary of the implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with an analysis completion date of fewer than 6 months after the issuance of the report
- Will not be implemented with an explanation of wh

City Council, City of Santa Barbara – 90 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

Recommendations 1, 2, 3a, 3b, 4, 5, 6