

CALAVERAS NOISE RULES WILL COME WITH TEETH

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SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County sheriff's deputies may soon be armed with sound meters when they investigate reports of rowdy parties, roaring motorboats or noisy neighborhood target practice.

The county Board of Supervisors gave its informal blessing Tuesday to a plan to develop a noise ordinance with measurable standards so that law officers can enforce the rules and prosecutors can make the charges stick.

Calaveras County sheriff's Capt. Jim Macedo said during a study session that the proposed ordinance is based on similar rules in other California jurisdictions, including Placer County.

"The noise ordinances did work for them," Macedo said after Supervisor Russ Thomas asked if the ordinances were effective at reducing noise-related problems.

Thomas represents the Copperopolis area, where many residents around Lake Tulloch have complained about disrupted sleep and other problems because of noise from rowdy vacation rental parties or from roaring motorboats.

Supervisors asked to have a noise ordinance drafted after years of complaints.

According to Sheriff's Department records, the Arnold area also suffers from frequent complaints about noise in vacation rentals. Other major sources of noise complaints include firearm target practice within earshot of residential neighborhoods and informal motorcycle racetracks set up in residential neighborhoods.

With a noise ordinance, people who repeatedly disturb their neighbors would face fines. The draft calls for the first offense to cost \$150, the second \$250 and the third \$500.

Supervisor Steve Wilensky said he thinks the fines should be steeper, because some violators will see a few hundred dollars as a small price to pay and because the fines could help cover the cost of the sound meters, which cost \$2,900 each.

The ordinance spells out a complex set of rules for measuring noise. In general, it would be illegal to increase the sound in a location by 10 decibels or more during the day or 5 decibels at night. In cases where it is impossible to separate the background noise from the source that prompted a complaint, deputies would measure to see if the total noise imposed on a home was more than 70 decibels during the day or more than 65 decibels at night.

Macedo said he is consulting with local judges to make sure noise violation evidence will stand up in court.

"They want a quantifiable measurement," Macedo said.

The proposed ordinance has exemptions for a number of noise sources, including hunting and agriculture. The ordinance is proposed to have specific guidelines for measuring noise from motorboats, which would allow them to be as loud as 90 decibels measured near their exhaust pipes or 75 decibels as measured from the shoreline.

Candice Lopes, 26, of Copperopolis said she felt the ordinance was unfairly aimed at shutting down the activities of young boaters and wakeboarders at Lake Tulloch.

"I am opposed to a daytime lake noise ordinance," Lopes said.

Macedo said the ordinance would apply to all lakes in the county. He said in general the ordinance has been crafted to be based on impartial sound measurements that could apply to many situations.

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How loud is loud?

The decibel scale is set with 0 as the smallest sound a human can hear. The scale is logarithmic: 10 decibels is 10 times more powerful than the 0-decibel sound, while 20 decibels is 100 times more powerful, and 30 decibels is 1,000 times more powerful.

A sound of 100 decibels is a billion times more powerful than a zero-decibel sound.

Prolonged exposure to noise over 70 decibels is likely to cause permanent hearing loss, according to federal research. Studies show that background noise over 45 decibels interferes with common household activities such as sleeping or being able to understand a conversation.

Noises such as conversation and laughter can range from 50 to 65 decibels. Federal research found that noise levels over 60 or 65 decibels tended to provoke widespread complaints and threats of legal action within residential neighborhoods.

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