

The town board passed amendments to the noise ordinance Thursday night after two workshop sessions where several residents expressed their concerns. At the community coffee on Friday morning, the police chief and I heard more concerns about the noise ordinance and where the amended version might proliferate, with store owners placing amplified speakers in front of their stores and playing music to attract customers.

On Saturday afternoon, I decided I had to conduct an official “Mayor’s” investigation into noise and music in the downtown area. Commissioner Weller at the earlier board meeting had observed that there might be a number of restaurants in the area that played music. I also wanted to identify noise violations on my inspection tour.

I went to my silver Tacoma pickup truck and searched the area behind the seats for my magnetic signs that said, “Highlands Mayor On Duty.” Or maybe they said, “Highlands Mayor on Patrol.” At any rate, I couldn’t find them! I then realized that I had the idea of making the signs back when I was first elected 13 years ago but forgot to follow through on the idea. The only thing I did find in my search was an old cap with the town logo. I decided that would be official enough, so I got in my truck, rolled down my windows, and commenced to cruise downtown.

My first street was Carolina Way. I went by Highlands Brewery, where some folks were inside while a few were outside. I did hear a faint level of music and some people talking, but nothing that would cause me to stop and tell them to turn it down. Next, I went by the High Dive. Didn’t hear any music or much talking there either.

I made a right turn and cruised down 5th Street. There, I saw the next potential noise violator: a person playing a guitar and singing into a microphone on the patio at the Secret Garden. But I could just barely hear the guy's voice and could not discern the tune he was singing. Besides, the people there at the tables were eating their lunch and having such an enjoyable time, I just could not bring myself to stop and take control of the situation.

Next, I turned my truck onto Main Street and quickly approached the newly opened Town Hall. The only noise I heard was children laughing and occasionally letting out a joyful scream of delight. I left that one alone, as well.

Next, I came upon the outdoor café at Old Edwards. I had to stop in front of it due to the stoplight at 4th and Main. I did hear faint background music that was almost drowned out by diners laughing and talking. It was hard to make a complete evaluation because of the old BMW in front of me emitting a throaty engine noise.

Next, I proceeded down Main Street, looking and listening for merchants using radios or amplifiers to blast music and attract customers. I thought my mission was about to fail, but about halfway between 4th and 3rd, I heard it, music coming from on high. Initially, I was

perplexed because I thought the music would be at the store level, but it wasn't. I looked up to hear some music, but also people laughing and talking on the outdoor dining roof at the Stubborn Buddha. Again, it was faint, certainly not loud enough for me to take an act like calling in police reinforcements!

But just a hundred feet down the street, I saw a situation where action might be required. There was a group of people, several couples standing on the sidewalk, jabbering away. I just knew in my gut that the men talking to each other were at least at the 45 to 50 decibel level. And the women, while not at that level, were emitting a high, shrill voice level that might be deemed offensive. I was ready to spring into action with a parking space opening up right near the site of the offense, but a group of motorcyclists with loud pipes came up on the other side of the street and diverted my attention for a second. The group dispersed and went into several shops; the men went into Harry Bears' shop, while the ladies found their way to Bill Bubenick's establishment. I decided Harry and Bill could mediate the problem by engaging the offenders and selling them some merchandise.

Finally, I drove by the Mountain House only to find a comparable situation as was at the Secret Garden. There was another guy with an acoustic guitar and a microphone singing away. Like at the other venue, he was facing diners on the patio, and everyone seemed to be having a good time. The same went for the people next door at the Wine Shop. They, too, were at outdoor tables, enjoying their glasses of wine and having loud but happy conversations. Again, I just could not find a justification to spring into action against those noise and music makers.

I then decided to drive back home and evaluate what I had heard and seen. My take is that a little bit of music and talking, aka "mutalk," adds energy to a downtown business area. It is best that I or others not try to micromanage this kind of music and conversation.

As for the concerns voiced by some people at the board meeting and coffee, I think Chief Holland has it right. Our police will continue to monitor and enforce flagrant violations of the noise ordinance. If a proliferation of radio and amplified music occurs in the downtown area, the chief can come back to the board to review the noise ordinance again. But for now, let us see how the new amended ordinance works out. With that said, I suspect we will never get to a place in the business area where the old Simon and Garfunkel song, The Sounds of Silence, is the norm.