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Neighbors to Madison-Kipp: Shhhhh!

East-side factory is being asked to keep it down

by Vikki Kratz

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Sharon Helmus hears the sound when she gets up in the morning, when she's trying to enjoy a summer evening in her yard, when she's trying to sleep at night: the constant hum of industrial fans from her next-door neighbor, Madison-Kipp.

"My feeling is that the noise has gotten worse," says Helmus, 69, who still lives in the house on Marquette Street where she grew up. "This is a neighborhood. We'd just like peace and quiet."

The city of Madison's noise ordinance allows up to 65 decibels, day or night, in residential areas. But Kipp was grandfathered in at 75 decibels. Some neighbors want the ordinance amended to require lower noise levels at night, especially for factories.

"The noise requirement for Kipp is pretty archaic," says Steven Klafka, a member of the Schenk-Atwood neighborhood association. He notes that Milwaukee lowers noise levels at night for residential areas. "Madison's ordinance needs to be fixed."

Two weeks ago, Klafka attended a meeting with city officials and Ald. Marsha Rummel to discuss whether the ordinance could be changed. He came away discouraged.

"Definitely the tone of the whole meeting was, what could we do for Kipp, not the neighbors," says Klafka, who notes that the meeting took place one day after General Motors announced plans to close its Janesville plant. City officials, he says, didn't want "to do anything that might make Kipp leave."

Rummel, while sympathetic to the neighborhood's complaints, stresses that the city does need Kipp. "I think it's important to have living-wage jobs in our city," she says. "I don't want those jobs to go anywhere. But I do want to make them the best neighbors they can be."

Rummel doubts the city will change its noise ordinance, especially to target factories. The city "wants to apply the law fairly," she says.

Madison-Kipp employs nearly 400 people and has been at the Atwood site for more than 100 years, says company spokesman Mark Meunier. He explains that the noise Helmus hears is from seven industrial fans that cool the factory floor for "the health and welfare of our employees."

Meunier says the company monitors its noise levels and has never exceeded 65 decibels. He thinks Helmus may be blaming Kipp for noise that's actually from planes flying overhead, traffic on Atwood Avenue and construction at the new Goodman Atwood Community Center. "There's just a lot of background noise going on in the city at any time," he says.

The sound from Kipp's fans is worse at night, adds Meunier, because all that background noise ends: "It sounds louder than it actually is."

But Helmus, who keeps a regular log of noise from the factory, says the fans run on weekends, holidays and at all hours of the night. "The airport shuts down at 11:30. Why doesn't Kipp?" she demands. "I don't think it's an unreasonable request. The neighborhood should be given a break from the noise."

Curbing drunk biking

For the first time in at least a decade, the Great Taste of the Midwest will not have a bike corral. The Madison Homebrewers and Tasters Guild, which organizes the annual event at Olin Park every summer, recently voted to ditch the bike parking.

"This is something that has been a concern of ours for several years," says Eric Schoville, the group's president. "It's just a safety issue. Bicycling after having several drinks is dangerous, just like driving a car is."

Car parking is already not allowed at the event, although many attendees do park nearby. But in the past, the event has offered bike parking. Bike advocates are upset by the change.

"What are they going to do when 300 people show up on their bikes and there's no place to park?" demands Tim Wong, a Guild member who plans to ride his bike to the event. He says bicyclists will chain their bikes to trees, signposts and benches — anywhere they can find a spot. "Bikes are going to get stolen," he predicts.

Ald. Robbie Webber believes the group dropped bike parking because of concerns about liability. Seven years ago, a man crashed his bike on the rocks off John Nolen Drive after leaving the festival; he later died from his injuries. "It seems to me the legal argument is faulty," she says. "Under that scenario, bars should not have parking at all."

But Schoville says the group is less concerned about being sued than it is about protecting its patrons. The death "weighed very heavily on the people who put on the event that year," he says.

The 5,000 people who attend the event can get free shuttle rides or use a taxi service for a nominal fee. "We're not assuming people won't bike. All we want to do is discourage people from doing it," says Schoville. "We do our best to make it as safe and fun for everyone as possible."

Speaking of bikes

A few years ago, Ald. Webber went on a tour of Madison's parks led by then-Supt. Jim Morgan; it started at the Odana Hills Golf Course. But when Webber arrived on her bike, she found that the only place to park was an old wooden rack that didn't meet the city's code.

When she complained, she says Morgan cited a lack of funding to the Parks Division. "They can come up with the money to repave parking lots and they're worried about paying for a bike rack?" she says in disgust.

Now Webber wants the city to get serious about bike parking. She and other advocates are forming a new group, tentatively called Green Streets, which will push for bicycle and pedestrian rights. The group has asked the city to make upgrading its bike racks a priority.

Webber says many of the city's parks and libraries lack adequate parking: Tenney Park, for example, only has old "fence" racks. "They don't meet city code, and you can't use a U-lock with it," says Webber.

At the Pinney Branch library, the bike rack was installed too close to the building's wall. "It's unusable," complains Webber. "This is just nonsense. Any city property, especially parks and libraries, should have decent racks."

Webber wants Mayor Dave Cieslewicz to include funding for new racks in the city's 2009 budget. She notes that premium bike racks, such as the ones outside the City-County Building, only cost a couple hundred dollars per space. A surface parking lot, in contrast, costs thousands of dollars per stall.

"Bike racks are so cheap compared to everything else," says Webber. "It's ridiculous not to use them."

Speaking of water

The Madison Water Utility has hired a spokeswoman, presumably to combat years of bad PR and a poor reputation for communicating with the public. Gail Gawenda (who's married to Madison's city treasurer, Dave Gawenda) started in the new position on May 19.

Larry Nelson, who took over as interim manager of the Water Utility last year after David Denig-Chakroff resigned under mounting criticism, says the utility needed someone to handle all the media calls.

"In the past what's happened is the water quality manager kept getting pulled off a problem to address the media's concerns," he says. "We need to have someone so that our water quality manager and chief engineer can work on the problems."

Nelson says it's not unusual for city departments to have their own spokespersons — both the city's police and fire departments have public information officers. "The Water Utility needs someone to carry information to the public, who really need it."