



THE SENATE OF MARYLAND  
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Public Testimony on SB121 Vehicle Laws - Noise Abatement Monitoring Systems Pilot Program - Inspection and Extension**

During the 2024 Maryland Legislative Session, Delegate Julie Palakovich Carr championed the Noise Abatement Monitoring Systems bill to empower local governments to launch pilot programs using noise cameras to curb excessive vehicle noise.

Excessive vehicle noise from faulty or modified mufflers and exhaust systems impacts communities on a daily basis. This noise disrupts sleep, interferes with communication in business, educational, and social settings, and creates persistent, high levels of sound, often referred to as "noise pollution." Prolonged exposure to such noise can contribute to both physical and mental health issues for both children and adults, including hearing loss, depression, heart disease, cognitive impairments, and strokes. The American Public Health Association estimates that hearing loss in the U.S. results in annual health costs ranging from \$3.3 billion to \$12.8 billion.

Studies also indicate that noise pollution impacts everyone, but it disproportionately affects communities of color, immigrants, and lower-income individuals, leaving these groups more vulnerable to higher noise levels and associated health risks. The purpose of the bill is to establish a pilot program to enforce existing state noise laws, using automated "noise camera" devices, to mitigate negative health and quality of life impacts experienced by residents from excessive noise from modified exhausts.

**SB121** would enable counties and municipalities within Montgomery, Anne-Arundel, and Prince George's Counties to use noise abatement monitoring systems to automatically detect vehicles in violation of state motor vehicle noise requirements. By using noise cameras, counties, and municipalities can address excessive noise concerns without increasing traffic stops by law enforcement.

Sound is measured in units called decibels. Sounds at or below 70 A-weighted decibels (dBA) are generally safe. Long or repeated exposure to sounds at or above 85 dBA can cause hearing loss.

Some examples of decibel ratings for common sounds are:

- Normal conversation: **60-70 dBA**
- Lawnmowers: **80 to 100 dBA**
- Sports events: **94 to 110 dBA**

- Sirens from emergency vehicles: **110 to 129 dBA**
- Fireworks: **140 to 160 dBA**

Maryland and federal regulations both establish a maximum sound limit of 80 decibels for vehicles sold and operating on our state's roads. Under current law, it's illegal to modify a vehicle's exhaust system or to operate a vehicle that exceeds this 80-decibel threshold.

Although state law currently allows for police to ticket excessively loud vehicles, enforcement is difficult. Most police officers are not equipped with decibel meters and many police departments don't want to increase traffic stops.

Noise cameras, also known as acoustic cameras, work like red-light cameras, but they also use microphones to detect loud noises that exceed a noise of 80 decibels from a source 50 + feet away. When a noise is too loud, exceeding 80 decibels, the system activates to record a short video clip with audio, and takes a picture of the vehicle's license plate. The video and sound data are reviewed by trained staff to decide whether to issue a warning for a first-time offense, or a fine for repeated violations.

Any sound beyond the two-and-a-half lanes of the roadway adjacent to the camera should not be detected, according to MCPD Automated Traffic Enforcement Unit (ATEU) staff. The penalty for going above the current noise level is a civil penalty and not a criminal penalty. The first offense results in a warning notice, and second and subsequent offenses each carry a fine not to exceed \$75.

The cameras are sophisticated enough to recognize the difference between different types of sound by monitoring the noise pattern. As such, these noise cameras can specifically look for noise caused by illegally modified exhaust pipes and mufflers.

Several states and cities have taken action to authorize and start using noise cameras. New York City has been using noise cameras for more than 3 years and is rapidly expanding its program across its boroughs. Their program has been very successful in detecting cars with illegally modified exhaust systems and getting vehicles into compliance with the law. In its pilot phase, New York used just one camera and caught over 500 violators. Seven new cameras have been added to their program since the initial launch of the pilot, and they anticipate having up to 100 cameras by 2028.

Knoxville, Tennessee also started a pilot program in 2022, and in just 5 months into the program, their cameras detected excessive noise from 1300 cars. Other cities that are moving forward with noise camera are Albuquerque, New Mexico, Washington, DC, and Miami Beach, Florida. Worldwide, several jurisdictions currently use or will soon be deploying noise cameras, including in Paris, Taipei, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In Kensington and Chelsea,

England, within the first six months of their pilot program, cameras detected excessive noise from 10,000 vehicles.

This bill is modeled after Maryland's speed camera program and includes the same legislative safeguards:

- Enables local governments to use sound cameras to catch illegally loud vehicles.
- A local government would need to authorize the use of the sound cameras, after public notice and holding at least one public hearing.
- Before each sound camera could be installed, the local government would need to provide public notice about the proposed location of the camera and install a sign near the camera that indicates that noise abatement monitoring is happening in the area.
- An employee of the local government must review each citation.
- For the first offense, a warning must be issued.
  - For subsequent offenses, a citation is mailed for a civil penalty of up to \$70—the same penalty if a law enforcement officer issues the violation.
  - No points can be assessed.
- A vehicle owner who receives a citation can either pay it or contest it in court.
- Rental car companies are exempted, as they are under the speed camera law.
- The camera vendor's fee cannot be contingent on a per-ticket basis.

For these reasons, I seek a favorable committee report on **SB121**.