

Montgomery County residents get loud over noise bill

Council delays vote on relaxing noise ordinance

by Alex Ruoff | Staff Writer

An attempt to protect community concerts in Montgomery County has some residents concerned their complaints about excess noise will no longer be heard.

"Those concerts can get pretty loud already," said Francis Mullins, a Bethesda resident who lives on Leland Street. "I really don't think it should get any louder."

County council members delayed a vote on a bill to increase the allowable noise levels for seasonal arts and entertainment in the county's urban districts — Bethesda, Silver Spring and Wheaton — and Strathmore Music Hall in North Bethesda on Monday.

It is expected to be voted on Tuesday.

The noise limit in Montgomery County is 65 decibels during the day and 55 decibels at night. Under the new guidelines allotted facilities, to be designated by the County Executive, can reach 75 decibels.

Robert Brewer, an attorney for Strathmore, said 60 decibels was described to him as the noise made during normal conversation and 75 decibels is the level of sound a vacuum cleaner makes.

The bill was proposed as an attempt to help the Strathmore Music Foundation, who operate the music hall, continue its summer concert series, senior legislative attorney Michael Faden said.

In 2006, the county's Department of Environmental Protection, the body that regulates sound, received a series of complaints from residents in Garrett Park and North Bethesda about the volume of sound coming from the concert series and outdoor movies, said Stan Edwards, chief of environmental policy and compliance for the DEP.

In response, environmental agents took sound readings in and around the concert series and worked with Strathmore to lower the volume, Edwards said. He said based on those readings, residents of the pending Symphony Park — a 112-unit condominium community being built on the northern border of the music hall — could complain away the concert series.

On Nov. 17, attorneys Williams Kominars and Brewer, on behalf of the Bethesda and Silver Spring Urban districts, got the bill expanded to include any performing arts venue owned or operated by Montgomery County within the urban districts.

Brian Savoie, a Silver Spring resident, said in a Nov. 24 letter to the county council that the exemptions to the noise ordinance could get out of hand, letting too many venues break the existing limits. He said he takes exception to the idea that people living in urban districts are forewarned about sound.

"When we get to our homes it is nice to keep the noise on the outside," he wrote.