



CAMBRIDGE LICENSE COMMISSION

831 Massachusetts Avenue, First Floor, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

GUIDE TO PURCHASING A RESIDENTIAL HVAC/AIR CONDITIONER UNIT

Per the Cambridge Municipal Code, Noise Ordinance, § 8.16.060(E) (“the Noise Ordinance”), an HVAC or Air Conditioner Unit (“Unit”) sound levels (dB(A) noise levels), measured from your neighbor’s property line, may not be over:

50 dB(A) between the hours of 6:00 p.m. – 7:00 a.m.; or
60 dB(A) between the hours of 7:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.

After installation, many residents learn their Unit is in violation of the Noise Ordinance. The following shall serve as a guide to avoid this situation.

What to look for when purchasing a Unit?

Check the sound level specifications for the Unit. The lower the dB(A) number, the quieter the Unit will be. This information is usually prominently displayed on the Unit’s box or label. If you cannot find the information, ask a salesperson.

Note manufacturers generally measure sound emissions in close proximity to the Unit. This means that if the Unit has been rated above 50 dB(A), it may be in compliance with the Noise Ordinance if there is enough distance between the Unit and your neighbor’s property line. You should ask the salesperson, manufacturer or a professional installer the proper distance to ensure compliance with the Noise Ordinance.

Where to install the unit?

The farther away from a Unit, the lower the sound emissions (or dB(A) levels). If the Unit is placed close to your neighbor’s lot line, it is likely to be in violation of the Noise Ordinance. Therefore, when possible, place the Unit where there is no abutting neighbor or as far away as possible from the lot line shared with your neighbor.

How can I baffle the noise from my Unit?

Building a fence between your property and your neighbor’s may be a way to baffle the noise. Fences do not generally baffle the noise to the upper portions of your neighbor’s home. This means that even though the fence may baffle the noise to your neighbor’s first floor, it may not for the second floor.

You may install an acoustic enclosure around the Unit. However, you must ensure the enclosure allows for proper ventilation of the Unit. You should always check with the manufacturer prior to installing any acoustical enclosure or modifying the Unit as these can affect the warranty of the Unit.

**Purchase Guidelines
for Residential HVAC/AC Units**

What if I hire someone to install the Unit?

If you hire an individual or company to install a Unit (the “Installer”), you should ask for an agreement/contract that specifies the Installer will make sure the Unit will comply with the Noise Ordinance. This may help ensure the Installer chooses the best placement for the Unit. It may also provide you some safeguard if the Unit is found in violation of the Noise Ordinance and needs to be relocated, baffled or replaced. If the Installer refuses to agree or contract with such a provision, you should consider hiring one that will.

What else should I consider?

All machines deteriorate with time. You should remember at some point your Unit will suffer mechanical deterioration and the noise levels emanating from it will increase. Worn bearings, compressor wear and worn rubber mountings increase noise. Regular scheduled maintenance of the Unit will reduce noise emissions. Notwithstanding, slight increases in noise levels even on the best Unit and best-maintained Unit will occur with time.

Do you need more help?

If you have any questions about Unit compliance, please contact the Cambridge License Commission at 617-349-6149 or 617-349-9197, or via email to noise@cambridgema.gov.