

Traffic Noise on State Roads

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Issue

Provide information on laws related to noise levels on state roads and possibilities for noise abatement. Describe any specific protections offered to historic districts.

Summary

There are few options to mitigate traffic noise from an approved private development utilizing a state road. The most common approach to mitigating traffic noise is the construction of noise barriers; however, government funding for them has been limited for decades to federally funded new highway construction or reconstruction projects. A funding source does not currently exist to retrofit a state road with noise barriers.

Noise, especially vibrations, can be an issue for historic properties, but the law does not limit traffic types per se, even in a historic district. State and federally funded or permitted projects are reviewed for impacts on historic properties prior to approval, however.

Depending on the circumstances, a municipality may be able to refuse to issue land permits for a new project or condition its approval with certain limits such as quiet hours. However, once a project is approved, there is little that can be done to curtail traffic from ongoing commerce on a state road, assuming individual vehicles comply with state standards for motor vehicle noise levels. This is because while municipalities have some authority to limit certain truck traffic on town-owned roads, this authority does not extend to state roads. Additionally, municipal noise ordinances, which generally regulate noise by type of neighborhood, regulate only stationary noise.

State Motor Vehicle Noise Laws

State law requires the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) commissioner, with the advice of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, to adopt regulations that establish maximum permissible noise levels for all motor vehicles. The law prohibits (1) anyone from operating any vehicle above the maximum decibel level established for the vehicle, (2) an owner from allowing his or her vehicle to be operated in violation of these maximum noise levels, and (3) anyone from selling or offering a new vehicle for sale if it produces a maximum noise level exceeding the permitted levels (CGS § 14-80a, as amended by [PA 22-44](#), § 18). A violation of these provisions is an infraction.

Maximum Noise Levels for Motor Vehicles

Under state regulations, vehicles are divided into categories by their gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR), as assigned by the manufacturer. This is the weight specified as the maximum fully loaded overall weight allowed for the vehicle. Vehicles may also be measured by their gross combination weight rating (GCWR). This is the sum of the GVWR of each vehicle or unit comprising a combination vehicle.

The maximum permitted noise level for commercial trucks ranges between 86 and 92 decibels (dB) – roughly equivalent to the sound of a garbage disposal or food processor. Table 1 below outlines the maximum permissible noise level for a motor vehicle, which ranges from 72 to 92 decibels (dB), depending on the vehicle’s speed, weight, and the road surface on which it travels ([Conn. Agencies Regs. § 14-80a-4a](#)). (These levels refer to road operation. Different levels apply to vehicles manufactured before 1979 and to stationary vehicles.)

Table 1: Maximum Permissible Sound Level by Vehicle Weight

Highway Operation	Soft Site		Hard Site	
	35 MPH or less	Above 35 MPH	35 MPH or less	Above 35 MPH
Vehicles weighing less than 10,000 lbs. (i.e., most passenger cars)	72 dB	79 dB	74 dB	81 dB
Vehicles 10,000 lbs. or more, excluding buses	86 dB	90 dB	88 dB	92 dB
Buses weighing 10,000 lbs. or more	83 dB	88 dB	86 dB	90 dB
Motorcycles	78 dB	82 dB	80 dB	84 dB

Use of Noise Barriers

The Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) performs noise analyses within the limits of new highway construction and reconstruction projects (i.e., Type I projects) that are federally funded. These analyses typically consider average noise levels over a one-hour period to determine if noise abatement is warranted, reasonable, and feasible as detailed in the department's Highway Traffic Noise policy. For outdoor uses in residential areas, DOT considers locations where future noise levels are predicted to be 66 dB or higher as "impacted." DOT also considers locations as impacted where noise levels are expected to increase by 15 dB or more over existing levels.

State and federal regulation and policy separate noise barriers into two types:

1. Type I projects are required under federal regulations to mitigate increased traffic noise exceeding allowable levels that may result from new highway or bridge construction or reconstruction. The federal government generally will pay most of its costs as part of the approved project.
2. Type II or "retrofit" projects are not mandatory under federal regulations and federal funds cannot be used to pay for noise barriers for these projects. State funding for retrofit noise barrier projects has not been available in over 30 years.

Protections for Historic Properties

Noise, especially vibrations, can be a particular issue for historic properties, but the law does not limit traffic types per se, even in a historic district. Federal DOT projects are reviewed for impacts on historic properties prior to approval. If the project generating the traffic receives state or federal funding or requires a state license or permit, the project is subject to review by the State Historic Preservation Office to determine the impact on historic properties regardless of their inclusion in a historic district.

Depending on the circumstances, a municipality may be able to refuse to issue land permits for a new project or condition its approval with certain limits such as quiet hours. However as discussed above, once a project is approved, there is little that can be done to curtail traffic from ongoing commerce using a state road.

Through Truck Prohibitions

By law, the Office of the State Traffic Administration (OSTA) has authority to prohibit through truck traffic on any street or highway, in cooperation and agreement with the local traffic authority of a town, when necessary for the protection and safety of the public ([CGS § 14-298](#)). A "through truck" is a truck that travels from outside the limits of a Connecticut municipality through the municipality

without any scheduled stop in it. Please note that any truck originating or having a destination within a municipality where a through truck prohibition exists, such as a truck making a delivery to a local warehouse, is not subject to the prohibition within that municipality.

“No Through Truck” zones are generally designated through an administrative process, not through legislation. Requests must be submitted from each Local Traffic Authority (LTA) from all municipalities along the requested route to OSTA for review and consideration. (The current list of approved no through truck routes [here](#).)

Local Weight Class Ordinances

In certain circumstances, municipalities may prohibit trucks by weight class on municipally-owned and maintained roads by ordinance. However, municipalities may not (1) enact any ordinances precluding trucks from local roads if they become de facto through truck prohibitions and (2) use signs bearing the legend “No Thru Trucks” or “Thru Trucks Prohibited.”

The local road must meet the following [criteria](#):

1. be located entirely within the town limits,
2. be town-owned along its entire length,
3. not serve as a viable through truck route based on its geographic location, and
4. no portion may be a state highway or connect to a limited access highway ramp.

GPS Routing

In addition, the official federal [website](#) for GPS information and related topics offers instructions on reporting when GPS devices or apps are suspected of improperly routing commercial truck traffic through residential communities:

1. for neighborhoods with posted restrictions on commercial truck traffic, one may report violations to the local transportation authority or to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (1-888-368-7238); or
2. one may ask the makers of GPS devices, apps, and online maps to clearly label the restricted routes in one’s neighborhood by visiting their websites.

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