

Editorial: Time to share opinions about city penalties

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If you have an opinion about how much the city of Ellensburg should fine people who throw loud parties, litter or have a dog or cat off leash, now is the time to share your thoughts.

Last fall the state Administrative Office of the Courts reviewed every local law table in the state to be sure local jurisdictions were adding all state-mandated fees and assessments to the penalty amounts for local offenses. Given the state's financial woes, the attention to detail shouldn't come as a surprise. Lower Kittitas County District Court had not been imposing some fees so it updated its local law bail schedule, which significantly increased the penalty for some local offenses.

The changes covered a number of violations, from animal control to operating a business without a license. Among the increases:

- Having a pet off leash, from \$25 to \$52
- Failing to remove animal waste, from \$250 to \$513
- Failure to license a dog or cat, from \$250 to \$513
- Littering, from \$50 to \$103
- Failing to remove ice or snow from a sidewalk, from \$25 to \$52
- Disorderly conduct — fighting in public, from \$200 to \$410
- Disorderly conduct — urinating in public, from \$200 to \$410

The state assessments are required, and the revenue is split between the local court and the state. After hearing a case, the court can reduce the base penalty, which also reduces the state assessment.

The changes do not affect the cost of parking tickets.

Noise ordinance

The issue came before the City Council after a group of Central Washington University students, in what was likely a class project, submitted a petition asking that the noise fines be lowered. Under the changes, fines for violating the city's noise ordinance went from \$250 to \$513 for a first-time offense, from \$500 to \$1,025 for a second offense in a 12-month period and from \$1,000 to \$2,050 for a third offense in 12 months. It's predictable that cash-strapped students would object to the penalties, which are higher than those charged in similar college towns in the state.

While the noise issue focused on downtown establishments the last time the council reworked the ordinance, noise violations have been a bigger issue in residential neighborhoods lately. Neighbors who have been kept awake by raucous college parties were understandably concerned when the issue appeared on the Council's agenda. Some have argued that the higher penalties are a deterrent to loud parties, and have made a difference.

Ellensburg Police Chief Dale Miller told the Council that police give citations for noise violations 14 to 19 percent of the time, which is about the same as traffic tickets.

It's good to remember that there are a few bad apples in every bunch and most college students are good neighbors. When problems arise, law enforcement should be contacted.

The Council on Monday did not make a decision on the issue, opting instead to continue the discussion at a future meeting. Staff members have been asked to report back on how often people are cited for violating the ordinances.

Ultimately, the Council will need to decide what's fair. Is it fair to fine someone \$103 for littering, \$513 for not picking up after a dog or \$513 for throwing a party that disturbs the neighbors?

If you have an opinion, let your elected officials know. The email addresses for City Council members are on the city's website at www.ci.ellensburg.wa.us/