

By Anne Machalinski and Matt Reed

George Jochnowitz was sick, frightened and tired. He'd just gone through a coronary bypass operation at Beth Israel Medical Center and was looking forward to a peaceful recovery in his hospital room. The recurring sound of a car alarm from the street below – the sound that so many New Yorkers have accepted as everyday background noise – kept Jochnowitz awake.

“It was very annoying. There I was in bed feeling threatened and sick, and I didn't expect any sound to be able to come through the windows. But it did,” he says.

Jochnowitz eventually recovered from his operation, but he's still angry.

After two decades of blaring, middle-of-the-night car alarms, many New Yorkers have had enough. Some are staging protests and others, like Jochnowitz, are writing letters to politicians and newspaper editors. A number of community groups including Transportation Alternatives and NoiseOFF have urged the City Council to completely ban audible car alarms from the city, and the council has responded by passing laws restricting the alarms.

Car alarms that don't switch themselves off after three minutes, or that go off like a hair trigger after a subway train or large truck rumbles by, are officially illegal in New York City. But that doesn't mean the Police Department would ever issue a summons to the owner of such an alarm, Councilman James Gennaro says.

“The New York Police Department feels that [audible car alarms] reduce the likelihood of crime. They gave testimony that they believe it is a deterrent, but my issue is that 90 to 95 percent of car alarm noise comes from illegal car alarms.”

As chairman of the City Council's Environmental Protection Committee, Gennaro worked with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration last year to pass a revision of the city's noise code. But even though the No. 1 noise annoyance in New York City is, in Gennaro's opinion, car alarm noise, the Bloomberg administration only promised to do a two-year study on how police could crack down on illegal car alarms.

“They could care less about this issue and have also actively fought us on this issue,” Gennaro says. “The study is total baloney. I'm telling you that if Ray Kelly had this as one of his priorities and he wanted the police department to enforce against illegal car alarms, they wouldn't need two years to do that study. This thing would be figured out in two hours.”

The mayor signed noise code legislation in December that will take effect in 2007 and will place limits on barking dogs, ice creak truck jingles and air conditioning units.

But Bloomberg and the police department fought legislation, proposed by Council members Eva Moskowitz and John Liu, to ban car alarms. The two-year study on the issue came out of a compromise between the Council and the Bloomberg administration.

A number of community groups remain vocal about the need to ban car alarms and give New Yorkers a little peace and quiet. Transportation Alternatives issued a 26-page report in 2003, *Alarmingly Useless: The Case for Banning Car Alarms in New York City*. The report made the case that car alarms are costly, don't work to deter criminals and are negatively affecting the health of citizens. The Bronx Campaign for Peace and Quiet, the Silent Majority and NoiseOFF are similarly active in the fight to ban car alarms.

About 95 percent of car alarm incidents are false alarms, or alarms set off by passing trucks or glitches in the car's electrical system, according to a New York State Legislature study. And a national survey by the Progressive Insurance Company found that less than one percent would bother to call the police if they heard a car alarm.

But car thefts have steadily declined over the last 20 years because of car alarms and other anti-theft devices, according to Rick Mathies, a former car alarm salesman who is now executive director of the Mobile Enhancement Retailers Association.

Richard Tur founded NoiseOFF three years ago. He was bothered by car alarms five or six times a day while at home in Astoria, Queens. He lives next door to a police department, but found the cops were "passive and arrogant" about the consistent blaring alarms. He tried placing hand-made fliers on the windshield of cars with alarms that went off for more than three minutes, but was threatened with arrest when an officer saw him.

He's working to channel this anger toward making a difference and fighting for a better quality of life for similar sufferers in his community and across the country.

"In some cosmic way I was meant to experience this noise so I can help others to solve it," he said.