

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

Just how loud are those Locust Point ships? We visited some other noisy spots to find out.

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A pair of huge Navy ships, the USNS Charlton, left, and the USNS Pomeroy, are docked near residential homes at North Locust Point on June 5. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

Residents have lived with constant noise from two military cargo ships and they might not quiet down until January

For many residents of Locust Point, this summer has been anything but quiet.

Since early June, two military cargo ships the size of aircraft carriers have been running their generators 24/7, emitting a thrum that's kept residents up at night and prevented some from enjoying the outdoors. When the U.S. Maritime Administration said in July that the USNS Pomeroy and USNS Charlton might not connect to shore power until early January, some residents felt helpless.

"I used to love living here," said Nolan McCoy, whose rowhouse balcony faces the vessels from a few hundred feet away and across railroad tracks. "Now I come home and I feel like I'm in a psychological warfare zone."

The plight of these South Baltimore residents got us wondering: How does the racket there compare to other noisy spots in and around Baltimore? And how loud is too loud? To answer that question, The Banner ventured out to 13 places we considered noisy to measure the volume and see what nearby residents thought.

We used a microphone plugged into an iPhone with a noise meter app called "Decibel X." Here's what we found:

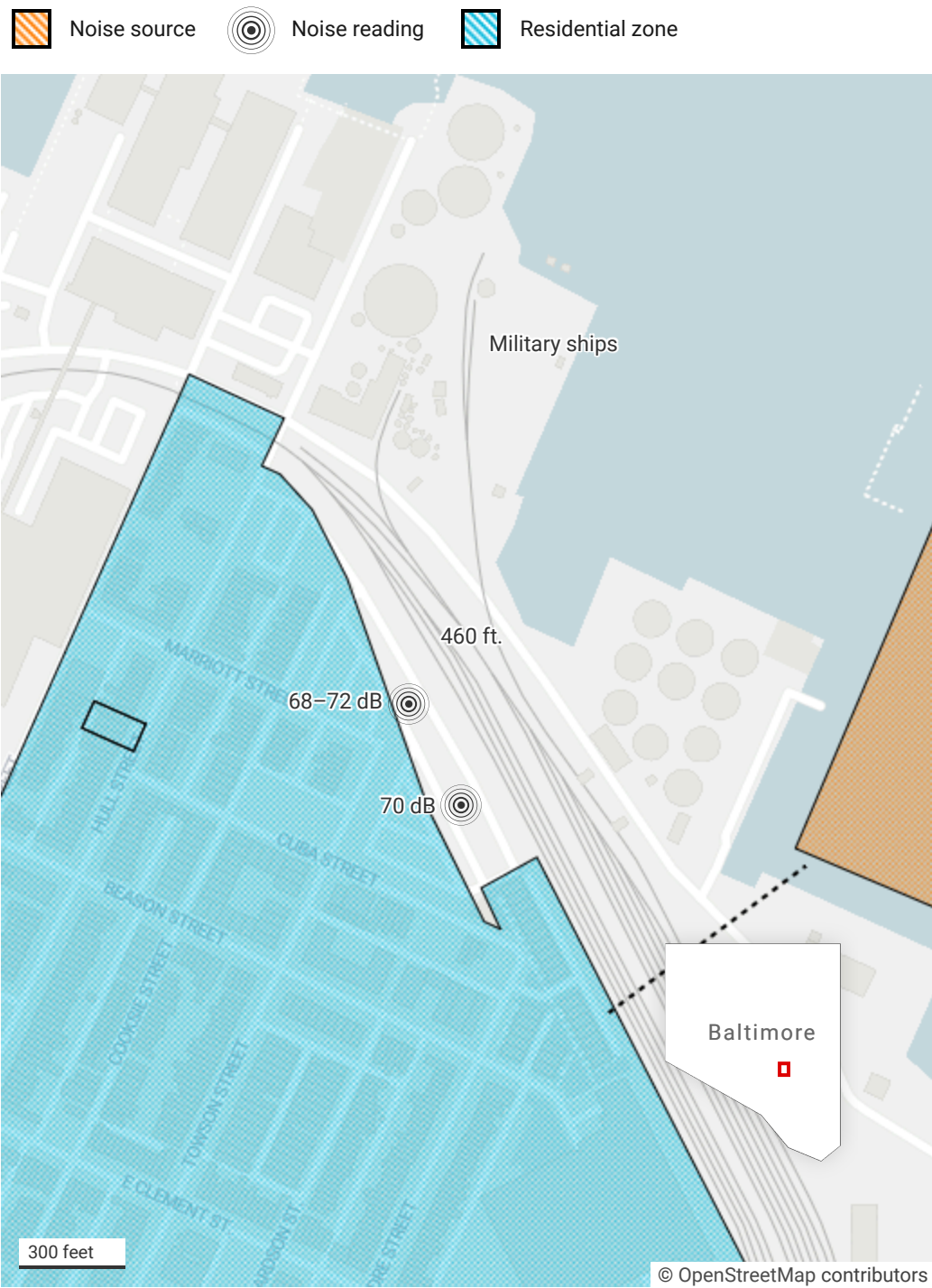
The military ships emitted a continuous 68–72 decibels when we measured from McCoy's balcony, about 500 feet away. It's akin to having someone run a [vacuum](#) beside you at all hours.

The readings were louder than the buzz of cicadas in nearby Latrobe Park at night (56 decibels), but not as loud as a passenger jet taking off from the observation area at Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport (94 decibels).

Many sounds across Baltimore — like a helicopter landing at the [Pier 7 heliport](#) at 89 decibels — are louder than the new Locust Point neighbors, but far less constant.

Military ships in Locust Point sit just 500 feet from residential buildings

From residents’ balconies, the ships drone at 70 decibels. That is equivalent to the sound of a vacuum cleaner, constantly sounding throughout the day and night.



Map: Patrick McCaslin/The Banner • Source: Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development (for residential zone boundaries)

Of the locations close to residential areas that we visited, Locust Point experiences the loudest continuous noise. The only comparable noise level came from the Johns Hopkins Hospital power plant in East Baltimore, which measured 69–70 decibels at the closest residences, about 400 feet away.

Erica Walker, an assistant professor at Brown University who runs a Community Noise Lab, said that while decibels are an important indicator of noise, it's the lack of control and powerlessness over sound that moves it from "something I hear to something I hate."

"We use superficial metrics to understand noise pollution in our cities," said Walker, pointing to a fixation on decibels. "But there are other aspects of sound that are equally important, like the character of sound, the duration of it, all of these things."



Ambient sound level of the ships docked at Locust Point (Eli Pekelny/The Banner)

David Eisenman, an ear disease specialist at the University of Maryland Medical System, loosely compared the situation at Locust Point to the ringing in ears caused by [tinnitus](#). For some, constant noise melts into the background; for others, it can be very bothersome.

“A continuous sound, even if very soft, can be likely to provoke anxiety and stress in people, even if it’s not going to provoke hearing loss,” Eisenman said.

According to a [Maryland legislative report](#), 70 decibels is not considered “harmful” to human hearing, but extended exposure can be disturbing and affect “concentration, raise blood pressure levels, and cause a number of adverse health effects.”

The Maryland Department of the Environment and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration visited the site in mid-August. The MDE determined that “no visible emissions were observed, no odors were

observed, and no loud noises were heard from the two ships at Locust Point,” according to its report.

Jay Apperson, an MDE spokesperson, wrote in an email to The Banner that the inspector got as close as he could without being on port property. He added that the inspector did not use a device to measure sound, but “based his observation on his many years of experience.”

Apperson noted that noise complaints are a local jurisdiction’s issue.

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The [Baltimore City Health Department](#) sets 70 decibels as the noise limit for property lines between residential and manufacturing zones. In July and August, the department said, it measured the ship noise to be 60–62 decibels “at or near” McCoy’s residence. Differences in equipment and measuring techniques mean their readings may differ from the Banner’s findings.

A health department spokesperson told The Banner that because the ships are federally owned, efforts by the agency to “enforce local provisions will be difficult and likely unsuccessful.”

McCoy said that while the exact decibel readings fluctuate, the hum is ever-present.

Apperson said MDE will conduct monthly observations for the next three months, with the next one in mid-September.

Locust Point ship noise rivals that of incinerator and sugar refinery

Loud noises exist across Baltimore, but few constant noise sources are as close to residential areas as the military ships parked at Locust Point.

Cicadas at Latrobe Park	58 dB
Interstate 83 and train yard by Riverside Park	71 dB
Domino Sugar refinery	71 dB
Military ships at Locust Point	72 dB
WIN Waste Innovations incinerator	72 dB
Construction on Johns Hopkins Life Sciences Building	74 dB
Train leaving Baltimore Penn Station	80 dB
Johns Hopkins North power plant	80 dB
Rush hour at Boston St. and S. Clinton St.	81 dB
Rush hour at President St. and E. Pratt St.	85 dB
Pier 7 Heliport (4MD) in Canton	89 dB
Construction on Baltimore City Hall	92 dB
BWI Airport aircraft observatory	94 dB

McCoy is troubled by the delay in connecting the ships to shore power, which would reduce the noise. He now

wears earplugs to sleep and often moves to the guest bedroom to get away from the racket.

Before the new ships arrived, two other large military cargo ships — the Antares and the Denebola — were berthed at the same piers, but residents said they made little sound.

Like several of their neighbors, McCoy and his wife Ingrid knew there would be noise at their home when they moved in four years ago. Living in an industrial area with a long maritime history, Locust Point residents are accustomed to city sounds, from train whistles to ship horns. But they did not expect loud clatter at all hours, inhibiting them from spending time outdoors, dining on the balcony and watching the harbor.

“If we had known about the ships, we wouldn’t have moved in,” Ingrid said.

Here’s what we found at some other noisy spots.

Johns Hopkins Power Plant

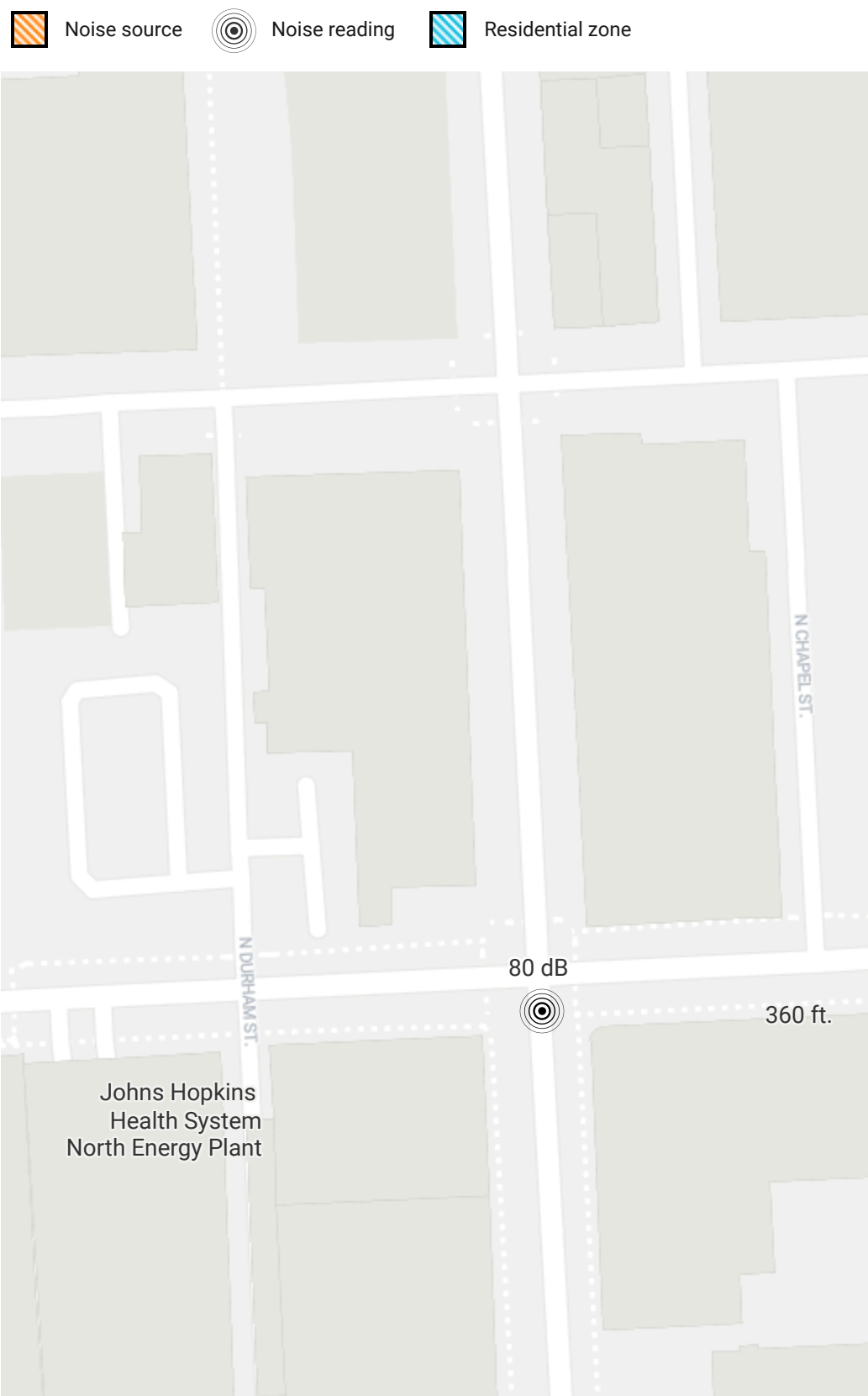
At its East Baltimore medical campus, Johns Hopkins operates a power plant that provides cooling and heating as well as back-up electricity. It also fills nearby streets with the sound of rushing wind.



Ambient sound levels at the Johns Hopkins Power Plant (Eli Pekelny/The Banner)

Residents near Johns Hopkins Hospital experience similar noise levels as those near Locust Point ships

The power plant maintains a sound level of 80 decibels. Its noise is audible in residential zones, punctuated by the intermittent wail of sirens which can peak at 120–130 dB.





Right outside the power station, the sound measured 80 decibels, but Anthony Walker, a public safety officer stationed there, said he didn't mind. The noise reminded him of the ocean.

Nearby residents don't share his appreciation. In a residential area 400 feet away, the din was about 70 decibels, combined with the rush of traffic and blare of passing ambulances.

Gang Yu, a resident scholar at Hopkins, moved from China a little more than a year ago, choosing an apartment close to the hospital.

Ambulances generate the loudest noise, he said, though that doesn't bother him as a physician. But he can hear the power plant from the back of his house.

"If my family came with me," Yu said, "I would move to another place."

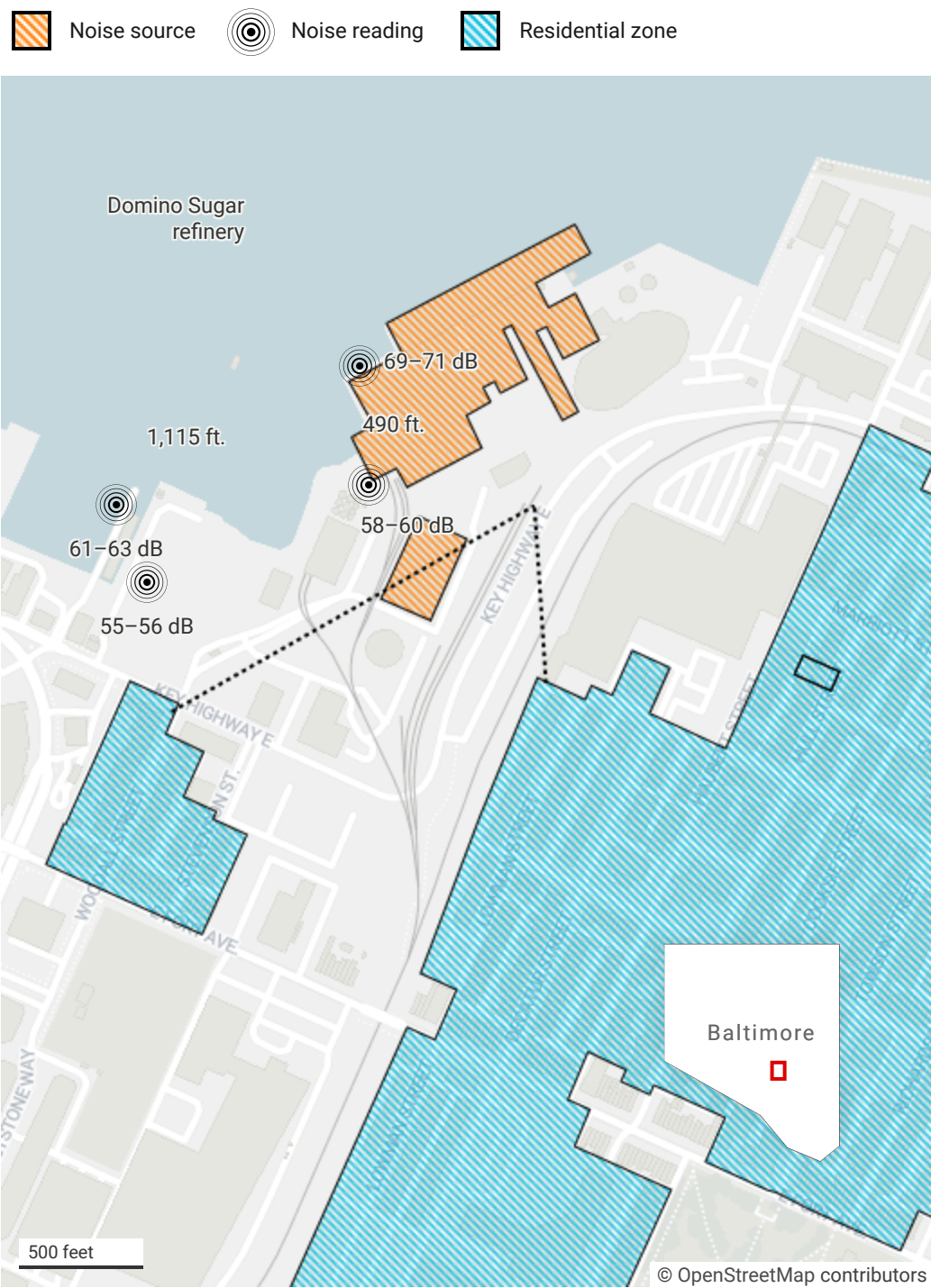
Domino Sugar

The Domino Sugar refinery in Locust Point — and its iconic red sign — are a fixture on Baltimore's waterfront.

Up close, the factory produces a drumming sound that reached about 70 decibels.

Domino Sugar refinery noise is faintly audible outside local residences

A barrier of trees directly outside the closest residential area reduces sound levels from the facility.



Map: Patrick McCaslin/The Banner • Source: Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development (for residential zone boundaries)

On the steps of Gabriella Brager's apartment about 300 feet away, the factory noise reached about 55 decibels. She doesn't hear the military ships. Most of the surrounding noise, she said, comes from trucks passing by or going to Domino Sugar. Sometimes, passing trains awaken her.

Brager, a student at Towson University, said she's gotten used to the the sugar plant's hum. After two years living there, it's become like white noise.

"It makes me feel a part of something bigger, and it ties you to the history of Baltimore," she said.

WIN Waste Innovations incinerator

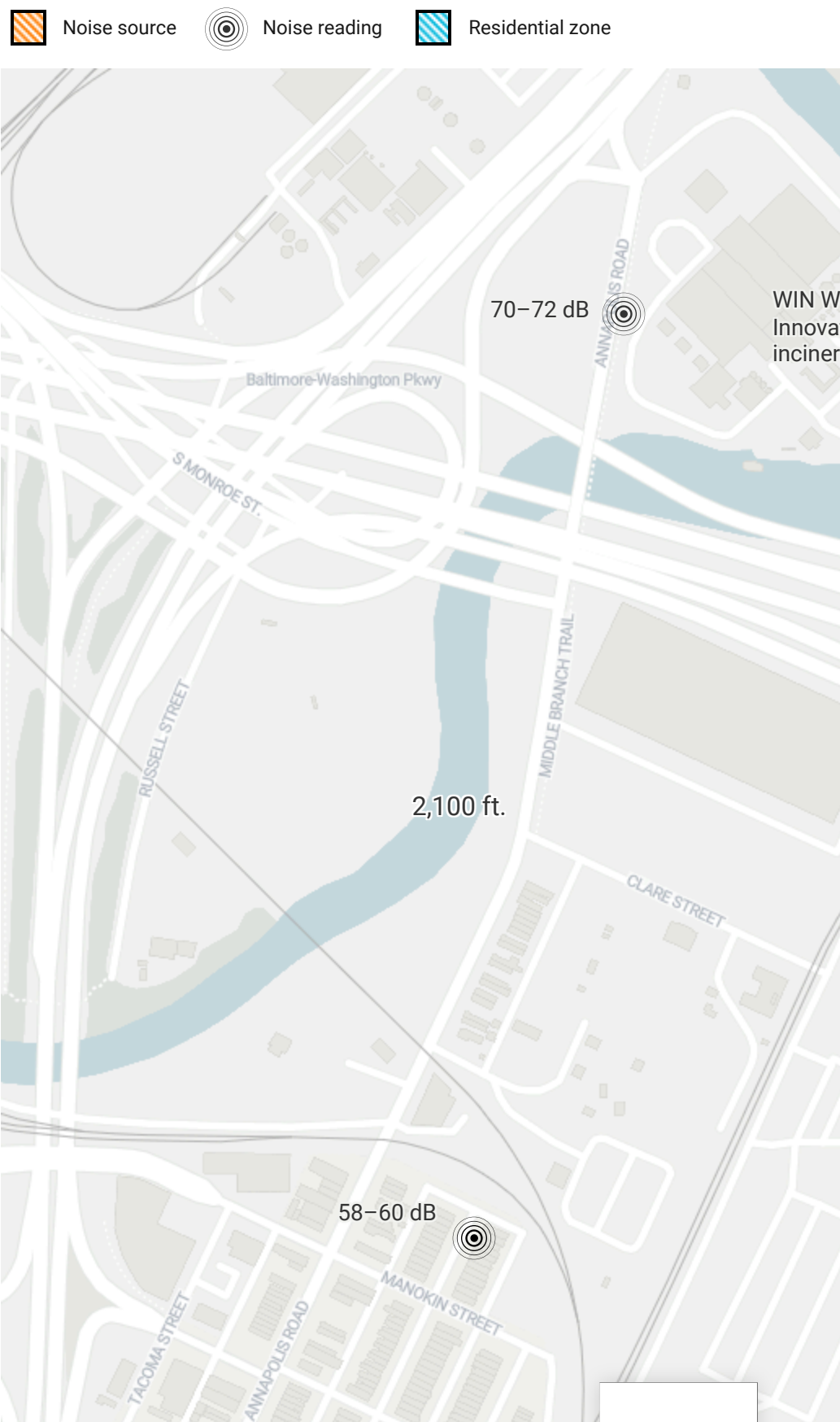
Identified as the [city's largest single source of air pollution](#), the WIN Waste Innovations incinerator near the Horseshoe Casino Baltimore also generates noise. We measured a noise level of 70–72 decibels directly outside its gate.

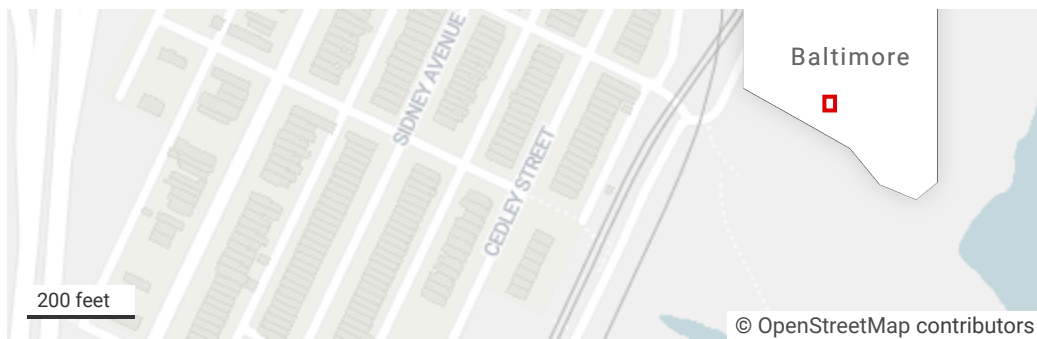


Ambient sound levels at the WIN Waste Innovations incinerator (Eli Pekelny/The Banner)

The WIN Waste Innovations incinerator is 2,100 feet away from its closest residents

In the nearby residential zones, the facility is not distinguishable from background noise readings.





The nearest homes are about a third of a mile away in Westport, located across Interstate 95.

Lounging recently on their front porch on Sidney Avenue, Shannon Smith and her mother, Tina Smith, said they don't hear the incinerator's deep whirl. They do hear the scraping of the nearby light rail and the rumble of passing trucks.



From their home on Sidney Avenue, Shannon Smith, right, and her mother Tina Smith, hear the scraping of the nearby light rail and the rumble of passing trucks. (Nina Giraldo/The Banner)

“You get used to it after 60-something years,” said Tina Smith, who’s lived on the street all of her 64 years.

BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport

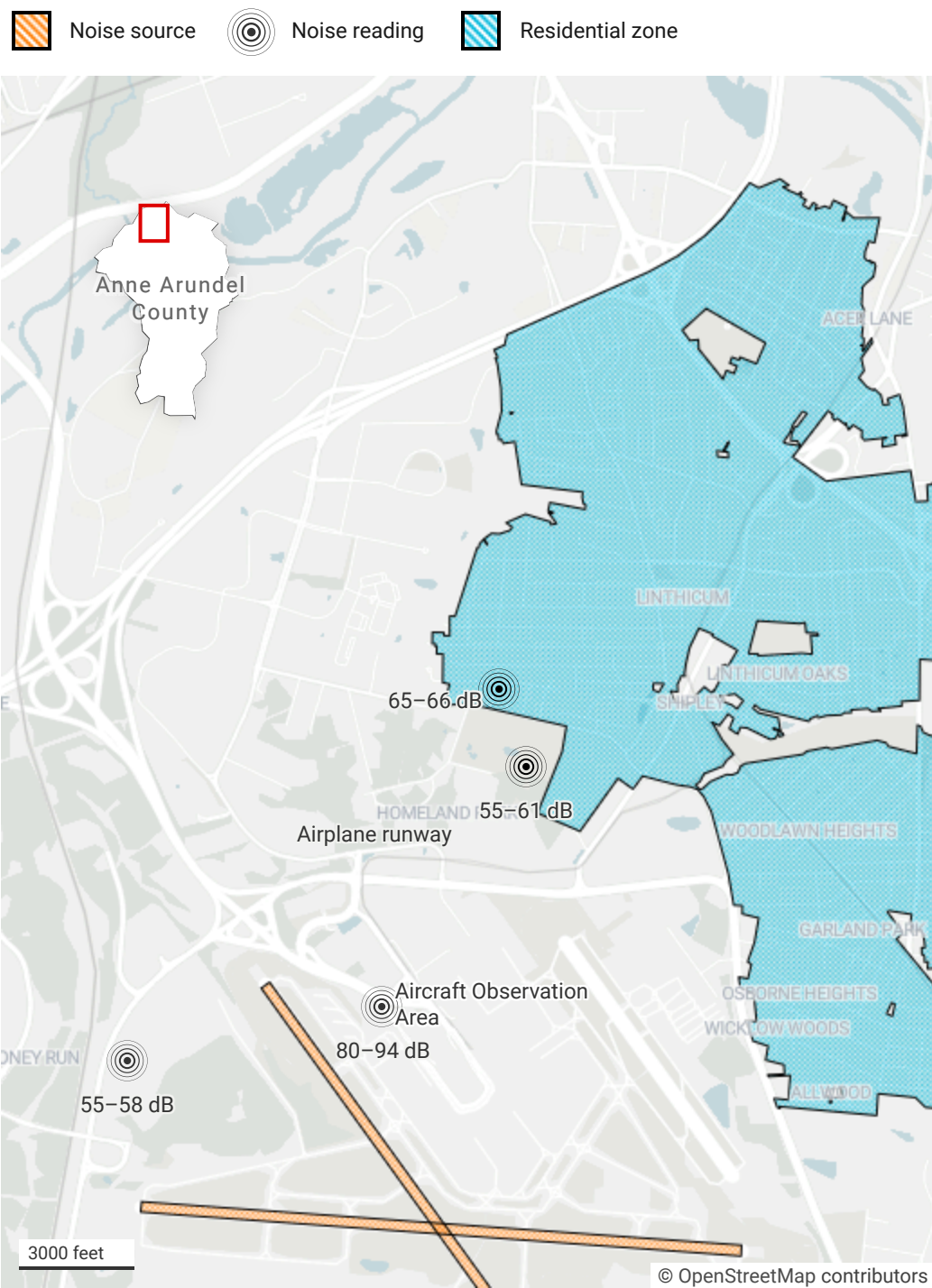
BWI, which [turned 75 this year](#), has more than 650 domestic and international flights daily, and many nearby residents have grown accustomed to the frequent rumbling of airplanes overhead.



Ambient sound levels at Aviation Boulevard, near BWI Thurgood Marshall Airport (Eli Pekelny/The Banner)

Tree barriers shield residents from the brunt of BWI's noise

Planes taking off over the airport's aircraft observation area reach up to a thunderous 94 decibels. That noise is significantly reduced in nearby residential zones, with peaks of 66 dB during takeoffs.



Map: Patrick McCaslin/The Banner • Source: Anne Arundel County Office of Planning and Zoning (for residential zone boundaries)

While it was loudest at or next to the airport, we recorded a noise level of 55–61 decibels in the nearby Allwood neighborhood of Glen Burnie when a plane took off.

James Henning, 81, and his wife have lived there for 43 years. The roar of jets “sucks,” he acknowledged, but living in their dream house near friends makes it worth it.

Henning said he used to have to talk over the jet noise, but that improved after state officials [allotted \\$1.1 million to soundproof homes](#) near the airport in 2023, including Henning’s. While Henning said that reduced the noise he hears inside the house, many residents complain [it wasn’t enough](#).



James Henning, 81, and his wife have lived close to BWI for 43 years. He mostly notices the noise when he's outside. (Nina Giraldo/The Banner)

[A study published last year](#) found that living near an airport increases chances of developing high blood pressure, diabetes and dementia.

Now, Henning said, he mainly notices the jet noise when he's grilling or lounging outside, with the roar punctuating the air every few minutes.

"We put up with it," said Henning, who retired in 2016.
"We're not going nowhere."