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Archive for Tuesday, May 17, 2005

Study: Pesticide-free parks would heap on costs for city

By Chad Lawhorn
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There's not much free about pesticide-free parks.

A new report by the city's Parks and Recreation Department estimates that by 2009, the city would spend an extra \$200,000 per year to maintain Lawrence's 52 parks without pesticides or herbicides. City commissioners are scheduled to discuss the findings at their meeting tonight.

"Unfortunately, it will be costly to do," said Fred DeVictor, director of Parks and Recreation. "It is like recycling. It is important to recycle, but the cost to buy recycled products is higher."

At least one commissioner said he was dubious.

"The report is a disappointment," said City Commissioner Mike Rundle. "It seems like the costs are inflated. I don't know if I should even take it seriously."

The department began studying the issue after a group of residents expressed concerns about the health effects of pesticide and herbicide use in parks where children play.

Marie Stockett, a coordinator of the Lawrence Pesticide Free Park Project, said the proposed plan was a step in the right direction but wasn't aggressive enough.

"It is obvious that they're comfortable using chemicals," said Stockett, who also said the cost estimates seemed "inflated" given what she had read about the subject. "I understand their resistance to doing things different, but times are changing."

But DeVictor said the costs were real. He said a ban on herbicides would require the department to hire an undetermined number of part-time workers to regularly weed flower beds.

Instead of pesticides, the department would use natural or organic substitutes that often are more expensive. The department could eliminate its pesticide budget, but that only amounts to about \$10,000, DeVictor said, because the department uses chemicals sparingly.

DeVictor said staff members had a "great deal of concern" with plans to eliminate pesticide use in intensely landscaped areas of high-use parks such as South Park, Buford M. Watson Jr. Park, Centennial Park and the downtown planters.

"We have shrubs that if we don't spray for anything or treat at all, they will die," DeVictor said. "We're afraid we'll have to let some of these plants just die and put new material in."

And DeVictor said that banning pesticide use at the Eagle Bend Golf Course could be another financial blow for the struggling city-owned course.

"It is challenging for us to get enough people to play there when the course is in the best shape it has ever been in," DeVictor said. "If it is not up to snuff, we're confident that will have a direct effect on the amount of rounds played there."



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Park users on Monday expressed mixed views about whether the city ought to spend extra money to reduce pesticide use.

Ashley Stapel, a Kansas University student, was lying in the grass at Buford M. Watson Jr. Park. She said more evidence of pesticide's effects would have to be presented before she would want to the city to spend extra money.


"I would rather they keep on using them, if that is what is cheaper," Stapel said.


But Lawrence resident Cari Davis, who was at the park with her 4-year-old son, William, said the money seemed reasonable given the city's general fund budget of nearly \$50 million.


"I would want them to make the parks as safe as possible," Davis said. "As a taxpayer, I would support it. I would rather the city spend the money to be preventive than come back and get sued for some type of problem."

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