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Portland's Chemical-free parks effort in danger of withering

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Joe Fitzgibbon, Special to The Oregonian

A Portland test program starts out well, but volunteer participation fades

Most Portlanders will tell you they want pesticides banned from parks. They want native plants in greenspaces where children, pets and wildlife can roam safely.

But when it's time to set aside chemical sprays such as Roundup and spend hours weeding, only a handful of residents stand ready with rakes and shovels.

"I liked weeding because it's like a social affair where you can meet your neighbors while you're doing the work," said Dick Vetter, a retiree who helped **Southeast Portland's Midland Park** go chemical-free last summer. "But our work parties only lasted about three or four months, and I haven't heard from them since."

Therein lies the challenge, parks officials say.

The Bureau of Parks & Recreation in 2004 began a three-year trial to make three parks pesticide-free -- **Lair Hill** in Southwest, **Sewallcrest** in Southeast and **Arbor Lodge** in North. No pesticides were used. Instead, volunteers weeded by hand, mulched shrub beds and planted pest-resistant species.

The Parks Bureau provided organizational and technical assistance. The bureau continued using herbicides and insecticides for the city's remaining 10,000 acres of gardens, trails, opens spaces and neighborhood parks.

Learn more

Go to portlandonline.com/parks; from the "Nature" tab, scroll to "Invasive Plants & Pests" and "Pesticide-Free Parks"; and pesticide.org/pfp/portland.html



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Central City Concern

Frederick Wallace (left) and Leonard Brightmon of Central City Concern took part last fall in a volunteer work crew that weeds Lair Hill Park. Efforts to go pesticide-free at other Portland parks, however, have suffered from a lack of volunteers.

The formal trial ended in fall 2007, but the bureau added Midland Park in Southeast and **Hillside Park** in

Southwest starting in 2008. Then budget cuts left less money for supplies and eliminated a volunteer coordinator, and a dwindling number of neighbors have been willing to pitch in. The project is now largely dormant.

Sewallcrest volunteers remain active, and Lair Hill turned to work parties from **Central City Concern**.

"We have no trouble recruiting people, some who were formerly homeless or out of rehab who see this as a bridge to future employment," said Mark Alejos of Central City Concern, who supervises a crew of 10 to 15 men and women. "They're learning soft skills -- like showing up on time and following directions -- while they're helping out the neighborhood."

City administrators, however, worry about the project's future.

"It's in doubt unless we see an expansion of the number of community volunteers," said Eileen Argentina, a city manager. "In the worst-case scenario, we'll go back to our good practices again and wait until the economy improves."

Shelly Connor, program coordinator with **Eugene's Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides**, said 18 U.S. cities with 80 parks have similar programs. She's urging the city not to give up.

"Any time you use herbicides and pesticides, there's a risk to the air and the groundwater," Connor said. "Providing the right tools and techniques can be a little tricky, but if the community wants it, we should do all that we can to make it happen."

John Reed, the Parks Bureau's pest-management coordinator, acknowledged the ups and downs of working with volunteers.

"They can be very enthusiastic and feel a real ownership in their neighborhood parks," Reed said. "The real challenge is getting that long-term commitment from them to keep the maintenance going year-round."

Parks officials planned to meet this week with neighborhood leaders and volunteers in an effort to reinvigorate the program.

--Joe Fitzgibbon, Special the The Oregonian

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