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City Commission to consider plan to rid parks of pesticides

By Chad Lawhorn
March 29, 2005

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Terry Shistar has dandelions in her rural Lawrence yard, and she's happy to report that the world hasn't come to an end.

And she said she didn't think the sky would fall if Lawrence residents began finding a few of the colorful weeds in their public parks or at the city-owned golf course, either.

"We've all been sold this picture of a perfect lawn through advertising, and it is just not natural," Shistar said.

Shistar, an adjunct assistant professor in environmental studies at Kansas University, is

among a group of residents pushing for Lawrence city commissioners to adopt a policy that would essentially ban by 2008 the use of all pesticides in the city's 52 parks, including at the Eagle Bend Golf Course.

Mayor Mike Rundle, also a supporter of the proposed ban, has put the issue on the agenda for the City Commission's meeting tonight.

"It has become a health issue," Rundle said, pointing to studies that have found an increased risk of neurological damage in young children exposed to pesticides. Other studies also have suggested links to asthma and cancer.

Both Rundle and Shistar said they believed city residents would notice few changes to the aesthetics of city parks if the green spaces were pesticide-free. Both said there were other ways to control weeds, such as increased aeration and the use of a machine that sprays hot water to kill common weeds, that would make it unlikely city parks would become overrun with unwanted vegetation.

"People might have to get used to seeing an occasional weed or two," Rundle said. "People might have to get used to seeing people pulling weeds."

That's a thought that creates questions for Fred DeVictor, director of the city's parks and recreation department. DeVictor said his department didn't have enough workers to hand pull all the weeds currently sprayed.

"It would be tougher for us to maintain any landscape without the use of pesticides," DeVictor said.

The city has been trying the concept of pesticide-free parks in a limited way since 2002. That's when the city designated a four-mile stretch of right-of-way along Clinton Parkway between Iowa Street and Clinton Lake, 2.7-acre Parnell Park, 901 E. 15th St. and the 1.7-acre Ludlam Park, 2800 W. Ninth St. as pesticide-free parks.



A blossoming tree frames a cyclist navigating a sidewalk in South Park. City commissioners will discuss a plan tonight to have all city parks pesticide-free by 2008. South Park buzzed with activity on Monday.

Controlling weeds

DeVictor said the city had to begin using pesticides on the stretch of right-of-way after the county cited the city for violating the noxious-weed ordinance. Results at the other

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two parks have been mixed. DeVictor said weeds were frequently visible in sandy areas where children play.

"The public will have to be the judge of how that is working," DeVictor said. "It is not the way we like it, but we don't have the labor to pull weeds by hand."

DeVictor said the city used very few pesticides -- about \$8,000 a year -- on city parks. He said the city did no broad-based sprayings but instead did spot treatments to control weeds and plant disease. DeVictor also said his office hadn't received health-related complaints from the public about the use of pesticides.

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The proposed policy would make it a goal to have two of the city's most visible parks, Watson Park and South Park, pesticide-free by the end of this year. The city's downtown flower beds also would be pesticide-free. By 2008 all areas maintained by the city would be pesticide-free, and if pesticides needed to be used, a special exemption would have to be granted by the City Commission.

Setting an example

The city policy would not limit the ability of individuals to use pesticides on their property. But all the parks would have signs proclaiming pesticide-free parks in an effort to get area residents thinking about whether they could use fewer pesticides.

"I certainly think if the city is successful, then other people will understand they don't need poisons to control what they have in their yard," Shistar said.

Members of the pesticide industry, though, said policies like the one the city is considering create undue concern among the public.

"Those people who are spraying in the parks are trained and licensed and using them as they are supposed to be used," said Kristen Van Veen, a spokeswoman for Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment, an advocacy group for the pesticide



A bee collects pollen Monday in front of City Hall, where the City Commission will discuss a plan tonight that would ban all pesticides in the city's 52 parks.

industry.

Growing trend

The group has seen an increasing number of communities that restrict pesticide use. In Canada, several major cities -- including Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver -- have either banned or restricted pesticide use by individuals and businesses. Van Veen said other cities have done what Lawrence is considering, though she did not know how many.

Commissioners will discuss the issue at their meeting at 6:35 p.m. today at City Hall, Sixth and Massachusetts streets.



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