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Author: Adrienne Beattie 2010-5-18 0:00:00

Our parks and other public spaces could be a deeper shade of green this season if we had a few different faces on council. I thought we might be turning a corner in 2008 when council voted in favour of a pesticide bylaw but last December they reneged and so, the spraying of unnecessary pesticides has once again begun.

That makes our city different than most others in Canada. Were the largest municipality in the country without a bylaw reducing or preventing the cosmetic use of pesticides. Weve managed to ignore what most others have figured out -- spraying stuff on public spaces that comes in a bottle labelled with skull and crossbones is not too clever.

The town of Hudson, Quebec realized that back in 1991 with its Bylaw 270 limiting the use of pesticides. Spraytech and Chemlawn, two lawn care companies, challenged the bylaw, appealing successive losses until the Supreme Court of Canada sealed the deal in 2001 affirming Hudsons right to enact their pesticide-restricting bylaw.

Since then, the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, along with municipalities like Halifax and Vancouver, have introduced full or partial pesticide bans.

Calgary, on the other hand, employs an integrated pest management approach, which is supposed to significantly reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides while managing pests. The approachs success is unconvincing. Between 2003 and 2007 pesticide use increased by 54 per cent.

The approach is ineffective and it doesnt resonate with Calgarians. Oraclepoll Research found in February 2006 that 80 per cent of Calgarians supported phasing out the use of cosmetic pesticides. Subsequent polls have confirmed those findings. Ive been covering the pesticide debate for almost 10 years and public concern has only grown.

It was about 10 years ago when Barb Kinnie and Jennifer Wright, two of the original local pesticide free advocates, presented a petition to then Ald. Bev Longstaff. Longstaff brought forth a motion to introduce a bylaw with members of the public packing council chambers in support of it. At that time, the motion didnt pass councils vote.

Aldermen Druh Farrell, Brian Pincott and Joe Ceci tried again in 2008 with a similar motion. Once again the public came to back the motion, some waiting up to eight hours to speak in support of it. This time it passed the council vote, but it didnt stick despite growing concern over the use of cosmetic pesticides.

While pesticides may be one weapon against dandelions and quack grass, these chemicals come with considerable risks. Theyve been linked to the declining population of pollinators, reduced nitrogen fixation, water and air pollution, soil depletion and human health risks, especially to those with compromised immune systems, children and pets. The concerns are strong enough that the Canadian Cancer Society, the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta and the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment all approached city representatives to encourage the adoption of a pesticide bylaw.

These groups asked for a bylaw because its the only means proven effective to decrease the use of pesticides. A 2004 study prepared by the Canadian Centre for Pollution and Cullbridge Marketing and Communications found only those communities that passed a bylaw supported with education were successful in reducing the use of pesticides by a high degree (51 to 90 per cent). Education and outreach programs alone, while more popular than bylaws, were far less effective, achieving low reductions (10 to 24 per cent) in pesticide use.

Statistics Canada findings confirm that research. The government agency looked at households that used pesticides on their lawn or garden, by province, in 1994 and 2005. While Quebecers had the lowest usage in the country, Albertans were among the three highest.

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So, with all this, why hasnt a bylaw been enacted here? It comes down to council. Specifically, Aldermen Jim Stevenson, Joe Connelly, Ray Jones, John Mar and Andre Chabot, who pulled an about-face on the issue claiming a bylaw wouldnt be enforceable, was out of their jurisdiction and would result in dandelion-rule. Those claims fly in the face of the success of bylaws elsewhere.

Heres hoping October 2010 will bring some fresh faces to council and a new resolve to go pesticide free.

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