

Back to the drawing board on pesticides

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Many cities have bylaws that prohibit the use of pesticides on dandelions.

Photograph by: Larry Wong, The Journal, File, Edmonton Journal

Re: "Council declines pesticide ban," The Journal, Feb. 7.

For more than a decade, I have worked with other keen citizens to reduce pesticide use in Edmonton. The best way to reduce it in a municipality is through a bylaw that prohibits use of certain chemicals for "cosmetic" purposes, i.e. to poison common lawn plants like dandelions, plantain and clover.

Years ago, Hudson, Que., passed such a bylaw. The town was dragged to court three times by chemical companies that arrogantly assumed that spraying these toxins was their right. Each time, the courts upheld Hudson's decision.

The final court was the Supreme Court of Canada, which upheld the right of municipalities to protect the health of their citizens.

Starting that day, many other towns in Canada started to say: If Hudson can do it, we can do it. Now there are more than 170 towns and cities in Canada with these laws, which protect the health of citizens, pets and wildlife.

Edmontonians must be free of the danger of being poisoned by their neighbours. Children must be safe. City playgrounds, parks and green spaces must be free of toxins. To do this, we need legislation.

The city uses many products that are associated with cancers such as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, childhood leukemia and prostate cancer, as well as neurological damage and reproductive problems.

A bylaw would not affect use of chemicals needed for health reasons or to protect the food supply or the environment.

What is the hidden lobby that is driving Edmonton city's administration (and council) to insist on using these chemicals? Is it the petrochemical industry? Why should citizens let business interests stand in the way of better health and reduced cancer rates?

Over the decade, our group has organized public information talks, met repeatedly with councillors, written letters to the newspapers and organized an online petition.

Meanwhile, the city has organized about three committees of "stakeholder groups" over the last 20 years. These were always dominated by the chemical-attached lawn-care industry, which was supported by the city administration. Health protection was always pushed aside.

Many pesticide reduction advocates felt they had wasted their time attending all those meetings.

On Monday, our group, the Pesticide Free Edmonton Coalition, appeared at a city council committee meeting. There were 17 speakers, all but five urging pesticide reduction. Speaking for a pesticide bylaw were pediatricians, an internist, a biology professor, a representative of the Canadian Cancer Society, a toxicology researcher and others.

After all those great presentations, councillors Kim Krushell, Ed Gibbons and Amarjeet Sohi, with support from Bryan Anderson, proposed a weak motion that the city administration should come back to council in two years to describe how they had reduced pesticide use.

What a huge waste of time! Now it is back to the drawing board, educating a very uninterested set of councillors who keep saying that working on this issue later would be better.

When will we see some courageous, forward-thinking public servants?

Elisabeth Beaubien, Edmonton

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