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Pesticide debate continues at town hall



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Lindsay Hanson

Burlington Post

Are pesticides toxic chemicals that cause cancer and other human illnesses? Or are they useful and highly-regulated substances that pose little risk to human health, if used properly?

Those two distinct viewpoints quickly emerged Monday night, as Oakville council met to consider a bylaw that could impose an almost town-wide ban on pesticide use.

The proposed bylaw would ban the use of pesticides within the town's boundaries, except on land used for the commercial production of food, and on golf courses that employ a groundskeeper accredited in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques.

Pesticides would also be allowed if used in a swimming pool, inside a building, for the purposes of purifying water, or to control animals, plants or other organisms harmful to human health.

During Monday night's five-hour-long meeting in front of a packed council chamber, local politicians heard from a dozen delegations with opinions on the issue.

A number of them, representing health organizations such as the Canadian Cancer Society, the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and Ontario College of Family Physicians, urged councillors to adopt a pesticide ban.

Heather Logan is an Oakville mother and registered nurse, as well as the director of cancer control policy for the Canadian Cancer Society.

She told councillors that scientific evidence has suggested a possible relationship between pesticides and certain forms of cancer, including thyroid cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

And while that link hasn't been firmly or irrefutably established, she believes communities should still act to protect its citizens from possible harm.

"I think we have the responsibility to protect people while we're waiting for full scientific certitude, not expose people while we're waiting for full scientific certitude," said Logan. "It just begs the question, why take the risk? You could just bend over and pull the weed out."

Her comments were echoed by local family doctor Susan Rhodes, who spoke on behalf of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

"Pesticides and herbicides are poisonous by definition," she told councillors. "At large doses, they kill people. At small doses, they kill so-called pests."

Rhodes said that studies have linked pesticide use to reproductive abnormalities, neurological disorders, hormonal disorders, depression of the immunization system and other health problems.

"Children are uniquely vulnerable to environmental contaminants," said Rhodes, noting that they have immature and developing bodies, and tend to explore their environment by touching and tasting.

"Please add our town to the list of communities that are legislating an end to these dangerous chemicals."

However, a professor from the University of Guelph disputed how dangerous pesticides really are.

Dr. Keith Solomon admitted that pesticide use carries some risk.

"Nothing that we do is absolutely safe," he said. "We do not live in a risk-free environment."

Solomon told councillors that the types of lawn and garden chemicals available for public purchase are no more toxic than baby oil, while those used in agriculture and by licensed professionals are about as toxic as chlorine bleach.

Solomon, who has done pesticide research studies for 40 years, said his work has shown that common lawn and garden products dissipate rapidly from the human body and the environment.

Councillors also heard details of how the federal and provincial governments register, license and control pesticides.

Lindsay Hanson, a manager with Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA), said that the federal government employs about 350 scientists in areas of health, environment and efficacy assessment, and only registers pesticides if they can be shown to offer a "reasonable certainty of no harm" when used as directed.

Monday night's meeting marked the third time council has considered a bylaw regulating pesticide use since 2002.

The first debate resulted in a referendum question being placed onto the ballot during the November 2003 municipal election.

In response to that question, about 52 per cent of town voters said they didn't support a pesticide ban.

The issue returned to the council table in Feb. 2004, when a motion to ban pesticide use that had been introduced by Ward 5 councillor Jeff Knoll, failed on a six-to-six tie vote. Knoll also introduced the current proposed bylaw, which, if approved, would take effect Jan. 1, 2008.

If Oakville adopts the pesticide bylaw, it will be the 131st municipality in Canada to regulate the use of pesticides, according to Kathleen Cooper, a representative from the Canadian Environmental Law Association.

Court challenges of municipal pesticide bylaws have affirmed that municipalities in most provinces, including Ontario, have the right to regulate the products to protect human health, said Cooper.

"Basically, you're putting in place the new normal," she added.

Council was scheduled to hear from another 26 registered delegations on Tuesday night, as discussion of the proposed bylaw continued.

For full coverage on that meeting see Friday's Oakville Beaver.

