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## Hamilton's parks under siege from dandelions

By Kevin Werner, News Staff

If nothing is done to combat Hamilton's growing weed menace in its sports fields and parks, they will be nearly covered in dandelions within a decade, say city officials.

Since 2003 when Hamilton instituted its integrated pest management program, the state of the city's 549 parks and sports fields has systemically deteriorated to the point where today anywhere from 45 per cent to 60 per cent weeds cover the average park.

Tennessee Propedo, manager of parks and cemeteries said within another decade all of the city's parks and sports fields will be nearly 100 per cent covered in weeds, with bare ground, and rutted surfaces.

"We are keeping our heads above water," said Propedo.

He said to prevent the further deterioration of the city's parks, councillors would have to invest immediately about \$2.74 million. That means spending about \$7,000 per field on maintenance. Currently, the city spends about \$3,500 for Class A fields, such as Mohawk Sports Park, \$2,700 for Class B fields, \$1,600 on a Class C field, and \$1,500 for parks with a baseball diamond.

"The only way to address it is more funding," said Propedo. "We are doing the bare minimum."

Gerry Davis, general manager of public works, said the parks maintenance budget wasn't a priority for the department this year because there were other more pressing needs.

"We had so many challenges this year," said Davis. "We will bring it forward in 2014."

Councillors recently approved the city's budget, including a four per cent increase for public works.

The infestation of weeds in city parks and sports fields have become more of a concern to municipal officials after Hamilton banned pesticide use in 2007, followed by a provincial ban in 2009. The city adopted IPM in anticipating of no longer being able to use pesticides. The program involves using biological and cultural controls, forecasting, sampling and establishing thresholds for pests and weeds.

After last spring's unseasonably warm weather, councillors were bombarded with complaints from residents about the weeds that had infested their neighbourhood parks and sports fields. Ancaster councillor Lloyd Ferguson complained that at two-year-old Moorland Park, located in the Meadowlands on Moorland Crescent children in the area couldn't play on the grass because of the proliferation of weeds.

Mountain councillor Tom Jackson said he's concerned about the condition of the fields at Mohawk Sports Park, which hosts high-level activities, as well as neighbourhood parks, such as Templemead, where local sports associations use them for baseball and soccer.

"There has got to be a standard established," he said. "We got rid of (the pesticides), but now there is a neighbourhood push back. We need to pull back a bit."

The province's Pesticide Act banned about 85 substances in about 250 products that kill slugs, grubs, earwigs, caterpillars, along with dandelions, clover, and a variety of other weeds. Among the products banned were C-1-L Weedout, Killlex Lawn Weed Control, and Wilson Garden Doctor Insecticide. Chemical weed killers are allowed only in cases where the public's safety is at risk, such as outbreaks of poison ivy, and sports fields where weeds are so bad they are creating a hazard such as blocking highway signs, damaging buildings, or blocking access to utility lines.

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The pesticide ban was supported by the Canadian Cancer Society and the Ontario College of Family Physicians, which in 2004 conducted a study that found "consistent links" between pesticide use and cancer, neurological impairment, and birth problems.

The city's current IPM practice to maintain parks and sports fields is applying up to two fertilizer applications, one overseeding, two aerations, and one topdress. What the city should be doing, said Propedo, is applying four fertilizing applications, three overseedings, four aeration, and three topdress applications annually.

Propedo said the Sports Turf Association, which he is a member, has been lobbying the provincial government to allow municipalities to use pesticides under a controlled environment using only a licensed applicator. Last year British Columbia allowed municipalities to use pesticides on a limited basis, but only from a licensed applicator.

A private member's bill introduced by Halton Progressive Conservative MPP Ted Chudleigh last year proposed to amend the Pesticide Act and allow licensed lawn care professional applicators to use pesticides on lawns and gardens. The bill failed to gain support from his colleagues. Councillors last year approved a motion supporting the MPP's private member's bill.

Propedo said without the proper funding and resources to maintain the city's parks and sports fields, Hamilton's economic benefits from hosting sporting events could be put into jeopardy.

He said with Hamilton hosting the soccer events for the Pan Am Games in 2015, there is a possibility the province will allow the city to better maintain its sports fields while the world is watching.

"It may help to extend the 10-year forecast before we are overrun," he said.

He said the city earned last year about \$15 million from holding about 160 sporting events that use sports fields. The figure doesn't include the RBC Canadian Open Hamilton hosted last year. Under the provincial ban on pesticide use, golf courses were exempt because of the negative economic impact the industry would suffer.


Members of the public works committee requested a report outlining the financial resources needed to properly maintain the city's parks prior to the 2014 budget discussions.


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