

After herbicide controversy Northampton to adopt organic turf management at Florence Fields

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NORTHAMPTON — Several months after controversy erupted over the city's decision to allow a one-time application of the weed-killing herbicide Roundup on the new recreation fields in Florence, Mayor David J. Narkewicz says he wants to treat the fields organically next fiscal year as part of a pilot program.

The mayor believes the city has a "good opportunity" to implement a more natural approach to turf management, a practice that has been used successfully at a small number of communities throughout the state and dovetails with the city's goals of adopting sustainable practices whenever possible.

"For me, all things being equal, I would opt for the organic route, but I needed to understand the cost and whether it could be done," Narkewicz said. "In a way it will allow us to pilot and test it with the potential for citywide use."

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The Department of Public Works estimates it will cost about \$15,000 more per year to buy organic fertilizers compared to their synthetic counterparts, though DPW Director Edward S. Huntley said the organic process is more labor-intensive and requires more frequent aeration and overseeding.

Ward 7 City Councilor Alisa F. Klein, whose ward includes the Florence Fields at the corner of Spring and Meadow streets, hailed the decision as one that will make residents happier and healthier.

"I'm very pleased with this decision. It's a long-term investment in the health of our citizens," she said. "I hope that this is the beginning of a movement towards organic management of all of the city's green spaces."

The debate over whether to use Roundup on the fields led to public outcry last August. Narkewicz initially halted a planned application after Grow Food Northampton, farmers and other residents raised concerns about the toxic effects of the herbicide. Grow Food, which owns a nearby 121-acre community farm and organic community garden, mounted a petition drive urging Narkewicz to adopt organic methods at the recreation complex.

A few days later the mayor allowed contractors to use the herbicide on a limited basis, saying it's the best way to create a strong turf field and reduce future chemical use.

Since then, the DPW, at the mayor's request, has researched the effectiveness and completed a cost analysis comparing organic and synthetic turf management strategies.

Huntley said part of the research involved meeting with Chip Osborne, the expert who manages an organic turf program for the town of Marblehead, and Bernadette Giblin, a Northampton consultant who specializes in organic lawn care. Officials also met with vendors to get an understanding of what it would take to move in the direction of organic treatment.

Huntley cautions that such a move will take at least a year to complete and will require implementation of a "bridge" program that uses both synthetic chemicals and organic products.

"People are going to think that we will flip the switch and it will be organic overnight; it won't be that way," Huntley said.

If all goes well, however, the fields will begin a full organic program in the spring of 2015, at about the same time that they open for business.

There's also a chance the city will need to rotate the use of the fields so they can stay healthy.

"The big thing that we don't know is the level of playing time that's going to be

allowed on the fields,” Huntley said. “That’s one thing that we will need to watch.”

The mayor is asking for \$100,000 in capital funds to manage the fields next fiscal year. Some of that money, which will be included in his fiscal 2015 budget, would be used to buy specialized equipment needed for organic lawn treatment, as well as a new mower and other equipment.

Lilly Lombard, executive director of Grow Food Northampton, praised Narkewicz’s decision.

“We are extremely proud of Mayor Narkewicz for prioritizing our community health, for considering the economic impact of pesticide use on neighboring organic farmers, and for making Northampton a model of environmental stewardship,” Lombard wrote in a message to members posted on the organization’s website.

Lombard credited the hundreds of citizens who shared opinions and research with elected officials for helping move the city toward “greater pesticide reduction.” Grow Food intends to continue that work when it meets with the Board of Health on April 17 to give a presentation and request adoption of a formal pesticide reduction policy.

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