

# Officials push for expansion of pesticide ban during film screening

*Sentinelnews*

GAITHERSBURG – When Montgomery County Council voted in 2015 to outlaw the use of cosmetic pesticides, weed killer chemicals whose purpose is to make lawns look presentable, they included several loopholes.

Currently, it is illegal to use cosmetic chemicals that include EPA warning labels on private lawns and in childcare facilities.

Exempted from the ban are golf courses, agricultural areas, turf farms and places with biting and stinging insects or plants, explained Mary Travaglini with the county's Department of Environmental Protection.

Also not included are the county's parks and playing fields.



Councilmember Tom Hucker. (Courtesy Photo)

Now, some members of the council believe it is time to end some of those exemptions. They especially want to stop pesticide applications at the county parks where so many children play.

Councilman Tom Hucker explained that the exemptions “should never have been there in the first place.” He noted that the parks were exempted to ensure the law passed with enough votes to be veto-proof in case former Executive Ike Leggett refused to sign it. The bill successfully passed by a six-to-three vote.

Hucker now wants the limitations placed on the park department as well, he said on June 30, following a showing of the film “Ground War,” which includes a section on what activists in Takoma Park and the county have been doing to ban cosmetic pesticides.

Many of the same people who worked hard to pass the initial ban gathered to watch the anti-pesticide film and hear Andrew Nisker, the film’s writer and narrator, talk about the medical problems of pesticides.

Although Nisker pointed out that an exact cause of cancer is difficult to determine, he believes his father’s lymphoma was caused by his daily golf games. The courses he played on regularly sprayed with chemicals, including one that was used to make Agent Orange.

His father died at the age of 88, although “he was a super-healthy person up to that point,” Nisker said.

According to Nisker, while he was searching for answers to his father’s death, he found similar health problems in golf course workers.

His investigation led him to Takoma Park and its successful attempts to ban many pesticides.

“Montgomery County was a fascinating story for me. There were actually doing something about it,” he told the audience gathered at the Arts Barn, most of whom are active in the anti-pesticides movement.

When asked why he made this film, Nisker replied, “My goal is like any filmmaker. I want to make people aware of the risks they are taking using these [chemicals].”

County Executive Marc Elrich also addressed the crowd, calling his efforts to get cosmetic pesticides banned “one of the better things I thought the council did.”

He blamed a lack of up-to-date scientific testing on the reason some chemicals continue to be used and are not considered cancer causing.

In the early days, chemicals would be given to an animal. If the animal didn’t die in a few weeks, it was cut open to see if it had tumors. If none were found, the chemical was not considered dangerous, according to Elrich.



Gaithersburg Councilman Robert Wu listens to SafeGrow Montgomery's Wei Wang prior to watching "Ground War." Photo by Suzanne Pollak/The Montgomery Sentinel.

"We know a lot more now, and our protocols haven't changed," he said. "Testing today does not reflect the state of our knowledge," he noted.

Elrich also called attention to "enormous forces and boatloads of money" from chemical companies to convince politicians not to ban their products.

Like Hucker, he hoped that the county parks department would soon ban the use of cosmetic pesticides.

"Dandelions are not a menace," he said.

In the City of Gaithersburg, "We don't spray anything bad on our common areas anymore," said Councilman Neil Harris.

However, he said, "Individual residents do."

Glenstone Museum in Potomac is "100 percent organic," said Paul Tukey, chief sustainability officer. That includes not just the well-maintained lawns but also the foods served and the products used to clean windows, he said.

"I've been preaching this for 10 years," he said.

Pointing to Glenstone's landscaping, Tukey said, "Going organic is not going ugly."

Post Views: 518