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## Parks & Rec Supports Use of Pesticides on Athletic Fields

By **Michael Dinan** | December 14, 2020

Saying it's healthier for athletes, parks officials last week voted in favor of a recommendation to keep using pesticides on New Canaan athletic fields where it's legal to do so.

Referring to a consultant's report that compared the surface hardness of a grass field treated with pesticides (Conner Field off of Farm Road) versus one that's pesticide-free (Saxe Middle School's), members of the Parks & Recreation Commission voted 7-1 during their regular meeting Dec. 9 to recommend to the Board of Selectmen that New Canaan continue a midsummer application of chemicals on fields at Conner, Mead Park and Waveny.

In making the recommendation, the Commission referred to a memo from Parks Superintendent John Howe, New Canaan High School Athletic Director Jay Egan and Recreation Director Steve Benko saying fields that don't use pesticides are harder and therefore more likely to cause concussions. The trio, identified as the "New Canaan Fields Committee," cited a \$3,000 (<https://newcanaanite.com/pesticides-on-new-canaan-playing-fields-town-approves-3000-contract-for-third-party-evaluation-3596810>) "Core Performance Quality Standards Assessment" of Conner and Saxe fields from **Tom Irwin Advisors** (<https://www.tomirwinadvisors.com>) of Burlington, Mass.

"Based on the information provided in the [Tom Irwin Advisors] report, the data shows that the use of pesticides on Conner Field has had a positive effect on the quality and safety of that field for athletic contests," the memo said. "The other Park facilities that receive a once a year application of pesticides are located at Waveny Park and Mead Park. While these fields were not included in the study completed by Tom Irwin Associates, it is our opinion that the quality and playability of these natural grass fields are far above those at Saxe [Middle School]."

Commission members voting in favor of the recommendation included Chair Rona Siegel, Carl Mason, Gene Goodman, Jack Hawkins, Steve Haberstroh, Laura Costigan and Hank Green. Commissioner Francesca Segalas voted against the recommendation. Matt Konspore and Jake Granito were absent.

State law prohibits the use of pesticides on school grounds through grade 8. In New Canaan, high school fields also are pesticide-free.

The Commission's recommendation followed a request from Selectman Kathleen Corbet for New Canaan to fully disclose and review annually its use of pesticides on the fields. She questioned (<https://newcanaanite.com/i-just-dont-understand-the-inconsistency-selectman-corbet-questions-continued-use-of-pesticides-on-new-canaans-athletic-fields-3332920>) why New Canaan continued using the chemicals on some fields used by local kids, and said the town should figure out how much it would cost to maintain consistently pesticide-free fields through over-seeding.

"Once further study and review of pesticide usage is engaged, consider public hearings, surveys, or other means by which community input is garnered," Corbet said in a draft memo from September. "In the last 12 years, new health studies, legislation, alternative products and applications have been developed and it is appropriate for the [t]own bodies and our community to be well-informed about the risks, benefits and limitations of pesticides and organic alternatives."

Yet the Commission pushed back on Corbet's recommendation for a budget analysis. Hawkins, who helped author the recommendation adopted by the full Commission, said, "Because of our conclusion, we really didn't think it was necessary to go any further into looking at the budget at this time, the budget impact of switching the fields from a pesticide use field to a pesticide-free field."

"Because what's, in my opinion, what's most important is the safety of the users on those fields," he said during the meeting, held via videoconference. "And the research that we received, the research that we saw, indicates that the bigger safety risk is from sports injuries from a hard field rather than from the use of pesticides."

It was unclear whether the consultant, Commission or "Fields Committee" limited their reviews to field conditions or whether they also included the health impacts of pesticide use.

The memo Hawkins helped draft said only, "There was no material provided to us that identified any adverse health concerns of the Park Department's current [integrated pest management] approach to their athletic fields."

According (<https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-science-and-assessing-pesticide-risks/human-health-issues-related-pesticides>) to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, pesticides can pose risks to people—such as problems with the nervous, hormone or endocrine systems, and some pesticides may be carcinogens—though generally "people are likely to be exposed to only very small amounts of a pesticides, too small to pose a risk."

Hawkins said the Commission's recommendation relied on reports from both the "Fields Committee" and Howe. Though Recreation officials filled a public records request for the "Fields Committee" memo, they said they didn't have Howe's report. Howe did not immediately respond to NewCaanaanite.com (<http://NewCaanaanite.com>)'s request for it. According to the Commission's recommendation, "John Howe stated that the adoption of pesticide free approach seemed to be 'based on emotion and not science.'"

Howe said during the meeting that he takes an "environmental-sensitive approach" to turf management "where we look at all the environmental factors and we use every single tool we can, from managing our water to checking life cycles of insects, so you are not just applying chemicals for the sake of applying chemicals."

"You are applying them to just go after the target organism as a last resort," he said. "You do everything else that's positive: fertilization, irrigation, aerification, over-seeding, even proper mowing with sharp blades and keeping the height of cut adjusted depending on the time of year."

Commissioners asked Howe whether there are environmental or water table issues (no water issues because the chemicals dry on the leaf and aren't absorbed, they also are not applied right next to ponds), what are Howe's credentials (provided) and how New Canaan ensures the quality of pesticide contractors (they're given instructions on application and accompanied by a parks worker).

Segalas asked about surrounding towns' use of pesticides.

Howe said, "Other towns that are not using pesticides on any of their fields—in my opinion, their condition shows that they're not maintaining properly."

The Commission in its recommendation did agree with Corbet's suggestion that New Canaan should disclose its use of pesticides on some athletic fields on the town website.

To her suggestion that New Canaan establish a panel to regularly review the chemicals' application here and seek public input on their use, the Commission finds in its recommendation "that this committee already exist in the form of the New Canaan Fields Committee"—a reference to Howe, Benko and Egan.

It's unclear whether, when or how often the committee meets—the town website has no listing for a 'Fields Committee' and there's no record of any past agendas or minutes at the Town Clerk's office. Howe, Egan and Benko did serve as *ex-officio*, non-voting members of group called the "Fields Building Committee" that helped oversee creation of the new turf facilities and track at NCHS. It met more than one dozen times between 2017 and 2019, according to town records. (The Board of Selectmen is scheduled to dissolve that committee Tuesday.)

The Commission's recommendation also includes an outside review of the town's use of pesticides, though qualified.

"We recommend that the Board of Selectmen or a town body help identify either an individual or a party to contribute that input, and most specifically, we believe that input should be from somebody who has the ability to provide some kind of commentary on health issues—the health of the pesticide use and the health risk to players on the field," Hawkins said.

Corbet herself, a guest at the meeting, cautioned the "Fields Committee" in its "use of terminology that was used in terms of Saxe field," which she described as "very actively used."

"We bring in outside towns and organizations come in and play all kinds of sports and so forth," she said. "I want to be really careful about our usage of risks and about head injuries and so forth because that can create a sense of liability that we want to be concerned about."

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