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Councilors vote against staff recommendation and support a ban on cosmetic use of pesticides

Alan Campbell, Richmond News

Attacking dandelions on your lawn with toxins such as Round-Up will soon attract a hefty fine in Richmond. City councilors on the public works committee surprisingly went against a staff recommendation Wednesday night and decided to create a bylaw banning the use of pesticides for cosmetic purposes, such as weeding, on city-owned and residential property.

The decision is still to be rubber-stamped by full council. But with the unanimous approval of the five councilors and Mayor Malcolm Brodie on the public works committee, it's extremely unlikely a reversal will happen.

Richmond will now join 18 other B.C. municipalities and 152 cities across Canada - including the entire province of Ontario - in banning the use of cosmetic pesticides.

It's a move that can't come quick enough for the Richmond Pesticide Awareness Coalition, local environmentalists and the Canadian Cancer Society (CCS), who greeted the decision from city hall's public gallery with a ripple of applause.

"We're very pleased and I'm very excited by this," said a clearly shocked Michelle Li, of the coalition, who delivered an impassioned plea to committee prior to its decision.

"I'm overwhelmed by their support, to be honest, and I'm surprised how much they agreed about the risks (of pesticide use)."

The CCS's Ashley Duyker, who has helped the coalition fight for the bylaw since the organization formed last August, was also stunned by the committee's decision. "I'm very happy to see Richmond step up and lead the way on this," Duyker said immediately after the decision.

The coalition and the CCS have argued that the risks of a link between the use of pesticides and certain cancers were too great for the city to ignore. City staff, however, recommended that Richmond stop short of an outright ban on the use of pesticides for cosmetic purposes (for aesthetic reasons such as weeding), opting instead to promote a Pesticide Risk Reduction Policy.

Staff acknowledged that advantages from a bylaw include sending a signal to senior government of community concern, providing a regulatory instrument for compliance and enhancing public awareness of the risks.

But they also stated in the report before the committee that the bylaw would only address five per cent of all pesticides used in Canada, doesn't address leading sources of pesticide exposure to children from diet and indoor use, diverts resources away from other needs and would be difficult to enforce. Staff further added that the annual cost of implementing and policing the bylaw - approximately \$225,000 - could be a strain on resources.

The city, however, does not have the right to ban or restrict the sale of pesticides and has no jurisdiction to regulate pesticide use on areas such as farms and golf courses.

Committee also heard from Dr. James Lu, a medical health officer for Vancouver Coastal Health, who explained that the risks from cosmetic pesticides were down the scale compared to the risks from tobacco smoke and suntan beds. And he explained that, although there is a risk from pesticide use, Health Canada have deemed that using 2,4-D (a major cosmetic pesticide product) does not increase the risk of developing cancer when used properly and there is no evidence to link the two.

Despite the alleged drawbacks of a new bylaw, Mayor Brodie set the ball rolling by tabling a motion to enact option four (promote Pesticide Reduction Policy and create a bylaw) with the new policy being reviewed in a year's time.

"I very much respect what Dr. Lu had to say, but why are we even taking a chance?" Brodie said.

"We pride ourselves on providing a healthy city to live in. The time has come and we should just go for it." His motion received unanimous support, with several councilors chipping in with their own personal horror stories involving pesticides.

"My family's been in farming for 132 years and we've never used chemicals," said Coun. Harold Steves. "I once saw my farmer neighbour use chemicals and it spilled one day and ate through the steel on his trailer. Many years ago one of my cows, which was pregnant, was grazing near to where the city was spraying pesticides on the west dyke. "She ingested it and aborted the calf within 12 hours and then spent the next two weeks suffering a lingering death until she withered away." Steves said he ignored advice at the time to sue the city, given he was a city councilor at the time.

Coun. Ken Johnston said Dr. Lu's point of view was "logical". But he added: "I had a puppy that died after a year. It was found to have all kinds of things growing on its lungs. "I couldn't work out what caused this until I realized that I used way too much Round-Up all the time in the garden where the puppy played."

The committee chair, Coun. Linda Barnes told members of the public to start getting used to the idea of seeing more dandelions in the city. Before committee voted, Richmond resident Wendy McDonnell pleaded with them to introduce the bylaw after witnessing eight members of her family being struck with cancer in the last year.

"It took 100 years for people to understand the dangers of smoking," McDonnell said. "I will go out there and enforce the ban if need be." City staff suggested to the committee that, should the bylaw be created as directed, money to implement it could be taken from last year's \$2.7 million surplus.

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