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JP's Love Canal?

by Bryon Martin, Bulletin staff

As fellow protesters gathered nearby on a strip of sidewalk, Gen Howe walked across the park grass, stooping here and there to plant little yellow signs with black letters that read "Caution."

Meant to resemble the little flags left behind by lawn care companies as a warning after they spray fertilizers and pesticides, Howe's signs are a little bigger and brighter. The skull-and-crossbones symbol is hard to miss.

Attention is what she's after.

Howe and about a dozen others staged a low-key protest Tuesday at Boylston and Lamartine streets, in the part of Southwest Corridor Park leading up to the Stony Brook MBTA station entrance.

The gathering of Jamaica Plain residents and environmental activists who participated in the event have been fighting for months to end the spraying of pesticides and fertilizers on city parklands.

Their efforts have centered on the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, which tends to the parks.

Fliers handed out by the group identify five chemicals sprayed by the DCR as "highly toxic" and a threat, they say, to those who walk the park or live nearby.

To drive the point home, Howe and other organizers brought in Lois Gibbs, a former resident of Love Canal, the town in New York state that was evacuated in the late 1970s and early 1980s after a plume of toxic chemicals spread underground and into homes.

"Don't take no for an answer," Gibbs said to the crowd, composed entirely of residents who live near the park and members of Boston-based advocacy groups. "Tell them you support people, not poison."

Gibbs, who now lives in Virginia, works as executive director of the Center for Health, Environment and Justice. She and Johanna Neumann, of the Toxic Action Center, organized the protest with Howe and the JP Neighborhood Pesticide Action Committee (NPAC).

Tuesday's gathering was an effort to keep the issue alive and tout a measure recently introduced in the Boston City Council, according to Neumann.

“There are three things that we’ve learned and that are important to remember,” she said. “Chemicals can hurt people, companies go to incredible lengths to avoid paying for the messes they make, and citizen action can make a difference.”

NPAC member Margaret Connors echoed Neumann, stressing the power that local action can and has had in Boston.

“We’ve met with a lot of resistance,” Connors said. “We’ve called and not gotten any response at times. But the NPAC has had successes too. They’ve stopped applying sludge to the park and they stopped West Nile Virus spraying in the city.”

Neumann agreed.

“The group here is doing something,” she said. “Two weeks ago, the Boston City Council considered a resolution that realizes pesticides on the parkway pose a threat to residents and their families.”

Literature supplied by Neumann and NPAC that described the Momentum, Merit, Roundup, Snapshot and Dimension pesticides as dangerous toxics, some so classified by the Environmental Protection Agency. Another is linked to birth defects and neuro-developmental disorders, they said.

The hand-outs also refer to reports from JP citizens about feeling sick after attending soccer games in the park, and pet dogs who fell ill after drinking from puddles there.

The city council order, first offered by Councilor Felix Arroyo and co-sponsored by Councilor John Tobin, would ban the use of pesticides in city parks.

A city council hearing on the ban is expected in early 2004, according to Neumann.

Howe suggested that the ban couldn’t come soon enough.

“I really hate it when they spray,” she said. “It stinks. It’s repulsive.”

The stink was still hanging in the air last summer when a warning flag in the grass caught her eye.

“I wondered, how can they put out signs that say caution, children and animals keep off,” she said.

“We don’t want this stuff on our parks and bodies. I thought, let’s turn that sign around. Let’s send a message.”



Lois Gibbs spoke to members of the JP Neighborhood Pesticide Action Committee (NPAC) to keep up the good fight Tuesday during a rally for the group. For months, NPAC has resisted the spraying of pesticides in Southwest Corridor Park and other open spaces in the city. A former resident of Love Canal, where toxic pollution forced hundreds from their homes, Gibbs now heads an environmental advocacy group in Virginia.