

# *Weekly Dig*

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## **Boston may stop poisoning residents**

*by Seth McM. Donlin*

Pedestrians and cyclists in the Southwest Corridor Park may have noticed the appearance of little yellow signs over the park's 50 acres. Modeled after the signage that park officials use to inform residents about a recent application of pesticide, these new additions to the park's green spaces warn passers-by of the danger posed by continued use of these toxic chemicals. The signs are the latest move by a growing group of Boston residents who wish to see the use of chemical pesticides banned throughout the city and eventually the entire state.

Leading this charge are the members of the Neighborhood Pesticide Action Committee (NPAC), who last summer convinced City Councilor Felix Arroyo to sponsor a resolution banning the use of chemical pesticides in the Southwest Corridor Park. Since then, the scope of things has changed. The current resolution before the council, co-sponsored by Arroyo and Health and Human Services Committee Chair John Tobin, seeks to make all of Jamaica Plain a test neighborhood for an eventual citywide ban of these controversial products.

"This is an order to create a dialogue on safer pest management located within the city of Boston," Tobin said. "The large number of parks in Jamaica Plain makes this neighborhood an ideal location for a pilot program using safer alternative methods."

Currently five different pesticides are routinely used in the maintenance of the Southwest Corridor Park (which includes the parkland, playgrounds, ball fields and community gardens that span both sides of the commuter rail from Back Bay Station to Forest Hills Station in Jamaica Plain.) The five pesticides are Dimension, Merit, Momentum, Roundup and Snapshot. Of these five, two are classified by the EPA as highly toxic, one is a known human carcinogen and another has been linked to statistically significant birth defects and an increase in neuro-developmental disorders in children.

In addition, Roundup (an herbicide commonly used in home gardens) has been found to interfere with the production of testosterone in men, resulting in reproductive problems as well as problems with immune system functions.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of pesticides, partially due to the fact that safety standards have traditionally been calculated for adults without taking into consideration the lesser body weight, and therefore greater risk of exposure, of children. One recent study has shown that children exposed to relatively low levels of herbicides and insecticides during their first year of life develop asthma at a rate two to five times that of unexposed children. Perhaps this is one factor in explaining why, of Boston's 16 neighborhoods, JP has the third highest rate of childhood asthma, while Roxbury suffers from the highest rate. In addition, JP suffers from the city's sixth highest rate of cancer. Both JP and Roxbury border the SW Corridor Park.

Beyond the health threat to humans, however, the use of pesticides has been shown to have as great, if not greater, an effect on the health of pets. For instance, due to their different body chemistries, dogs do not have the means to excrete acid-based chemicals such as Momentum. The chemical 2,4-D (the active ingredient in Momentum) has been linked to cancer rates among dogs at two times the normal rate, while another study published in the *Journal of Pesticide Reform* found that "enzymes used by [a dog's] liver to detoxify hazardous materials are inhibited by 2,4-D."

Chemical pesticides pose a health and environmental risk outside of the immediate application area as well. Information provided by the National Pesticide Information Center, a cooperative effort of Oregon State University and the Environmental Protection Agency, said that imidacloprid (the active ingredient in Merit) has a half-life of over one year in oxygenated sandy loam soil and thus poses a threat of ground water contamination. This contamination, of course, eventually reaches our local waterways, such as the Neponset and Charles rivers and Boston Harbor, where the chemical has an adverse effect on many forms of wildlife, including fish, shellfish and ducks.

Traditionally the superintendent of the Southwest Corridor Parks and the commissioner of the Department of Conservation and Recreation, Division of Urban Parks and Recreation have been resistant to the idea of halting the use of chemical pesticides, saying that it is a budgetary issue. However, a three-year plan drawn up by the members of NPAC has shown that a transition to a pesticide-free Southwest Corridor Park would only cost the state roughly an additional \$11,000 a year. NPAC has also begun discussing ways of offsetting some of these costs by increasing local volunteerism in the park and encouraging more neighborhood groups to "adopt" small sections of the park.

Arroyo, who said that the resolution's supporters were still considering upgrading their draft to an ordinance (an ordinance would be binding, unlike a resolution), said that he expected a vote before the end of December.

"This will set a precedent in two ways," Arroyo said. "One, it will serve as an example for other towns and cities to legislate for their own safety in regard to pesticide use, and two, hopefully it will serve to push the commonwealth toward passing statewide legislation." □