



Like a weed, pesticide issue won't go away

Last year, Bob Chiarelli vowed to make a ban on the potentially harmful chemicals a point for election debate. Meanwhile, other communities have made their choice, writes Matthew Sekeres.

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Moments after a second motion to ban the cosmetic use of pesticides failed last autumn, Mayor Bob Chiarelli pledged to challenge councillors on the controversial proposal and make it an election issue.

One year later, Ottawa does not have a bylaw banning pesticides on private property, leaving it on the outside of a growing group of communities across the country.

According to a recent position paper co-authored by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment and the Canadian Cancer Society, 120 communities, including the entire province of Quebec, have legislation restricting cosmetic pesticides. The paper claims that bright, weed-free lawns and gardens are not worth the potential health risks to those exposed to pesticides, which include cancer and birth defects.

"We base this concern on the conclusions of the International Agency for Research on Cancer that state that some substances used in pesticides are classified as known, probable or possible carcinogens," the paper said. "Since ornamental use of pesticides has no countervailing health benefit, and has the potential to cause harm, we call for a ban on the use of pesticides on lawns and gardens."

The mayor has previously taken the advice of the city's former medical officer of health, Dr. Robert Cushman, and called for a ban. An aide of Mr. Chiarelli did not respond to interview requests for this story.

Ottawa would likely join the list of communities that already have a ban soon after the Nov. 13 municipal election should Mr. Chiarelli or mayoral candidate Alex Munter get elected. Larry O'Brien, the other challenger for mayor, believes the evidence still does not paint a direct link between pesticides and health hazards.

"Until I have seen clear medical evidence to the contrary, I don't believe there is a reason to ban pesticides. We've had this debate and lots of misinformation has been put out," he said.

Medical professionals are careful not to paint unproven conclusions about pesticides and adverse health. The Canadian Cancer Society's municipal election advocacy kit, and other literature on the topic, speak of "associations" and "risks" without going as far as saying pesticides definitely cause cancer.

"In some cases, evidence linking pesticides and cancer will not be scientifically definitive, but it may be suggestive and growing," the Cancer Society admits in its position.

Mr. O'Brien said he would need more facts, and clearer information, before supporting a ban, and even said he would be willing to re-introduce pesticides on public property, such as parks and sports fields. That said, the former high technology executive also

wants to place restrictions on when pesticides are used for cosmetic purposes, and on who uses them.

"It would be fair to say that we would probably want some control to ensure that pesticides aren't being put on property at inappropriate times," Mr. O'Brien said. "Maybe, when there is a high wind out, or if the weather conditions are inappropriate, we don't want them to be spread around the neighbourhood. Someone has to have control so they are placed in the specific areas where they are intended and that you get them through the licensed operators."

Mr. Munter, formerly the chairman of the city's health committee when the pesticide debate first hit city hall in 2002, compares the issue to the smoking ban, saying restrictions are "inevitable." He also charges that Mr. Chiarelli and councillors failed the city last year when, even with a wide consensus, legislators couldn't agree on the finer points.

A first motion before council in October 2005 ended in a tie vote, 10-10, and a motion two weeks later was defeated 12-9 when councillors could not agree to hold a plebiscite before instituting a full ban.

There was also debate about what constituted an infestation. Councillors were willing to put exemptions on the ban should weeds cover a certain percentage of a resident's lawn, but couldn't agree on the percentage.

"Two-thirds of city councillors agreed there should be a bylaw. All the polling showed that residents believed there should be a bylaw. Even the lawn-care companies agreed there should be a bylaw," Mr. Munter said. "So, we had this consensus around a bylaw last fall that then broke down around the details. ... My point is, we shouldn't be talking about this. This issue should be crossed off the to-do list, and it's not."

Mr. Munter said he supports a ban with exemptions for infestations, meaning when the life of a tree or park is threatened without the use of pesticides, and for rural and agricultural property.

"This is a health and safety issue. This is about the protection of our soil, our water, our sewers, the health of our kids and of all people," he said.

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This Week's Schedule

Thursday, Oct. 12

Mayoral debate: A town hall on-air debate between candidates for mayor will be hosted by CFRA's Steve Madely, from 8 to 10 a.m.

Mayoral debate: Candidates for mayor will focus on business issues at a debate hosted by the National Capital Business Alliance at the Players Club, Rideau Carleton Raceway -- with networking and hors d'oeuvres from 6 to 7:30 p.m. followed by the debate until 9:30 p.m. The deadline for registration is noon, Friday, Oct. 10. Cost is \$25 for members and \$30 for the general public. To reserve, call 613-745-3578; 828-5556; 592-8343; 824-9137; 821-2751 or 692-4766.

Ottawa Votes: November 13 - Ran with fact box "This Week's Schedule", which has been appended to the story.

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