

Pesticide ban at Arundel playgrounds

Bill would restrict usage at county-owned playsites



Gina Penry of Annapolis shows a photo of a pesticide spraying notice on her phone while Terri Rafiq, and her son Reed, 11 months, sit on a bench in the background at the playground at Quiet Waters Park on Friday. (Matthew Cole/Baltimore Sun Media Group)

By Amanda Yeager Baltimore Sun Media Group

A bright yellow sign caught Gina Webbert Pendry's eye last month as she watched her kids play at Quiet Waters Park.

What she read on the sign concerned her. In an effort to control weeds, the Anne Arundel County Department of Recreation and Parks would soon be spraying the playground with pesticides.

“I was surprised they were going to spray here,” Webbert Pendry said. “It's a chemical. Kids put their hands in their mouths; the older kids run through the [sprayed] area and then [the pesticide] is on their clothes or their hands.”

She reached out to County Councilman Chris Trumbauer, a Democrat representing Annapolis, who this month introduced legislation that seeks to ban pesticide spraying on playgrounds in the county.

Bill 76-16 instead would require alternative methods for killing weeds and pests on playgrounds, such as weeding by hand.

“I'd rather tolerate a couple weeds on a playground than have to deal with toxic pesticides there,” Trumbauer said.

The bill contains an emergency provision — so, he said, “if there's a hornet's nest or some sort of giant Venus flytrap that could eat children, they could use pesticides” to handle the problem.

But a representative of the recreation and parks department said Trumbauer's proposal would make it more difficult to care for county playgrounds.

Chris Carroll, chief of operations for the northern county parks, said department staff already struggle to keep up with a 21-day mowing cycle for county land. They also have to maintain more than 50 playgrounds.

Spraying weeds is more effective than removing them by hand, he said, because the process takes less time and keeps weeds away for longer.

“It comes down to being able to get the job done,” he said.

Carroll said any pesticide spraying on playgrounds is targeted and used as a “last resort.” The council passed an integrated pest management plan in 2013, which instructs county officials to use pesticides only after exhausting non-toxic options. Pesticides can only be applied at certain times, during certain weather conditions and only after posting notice.

The playground at Quiet Waters Park had not been sprayed since 2014. Terri Rafiq, who often brings her three children to Quiet Waters Park, said she would accept seeing weeds on the playground if that meant there were no pesticides.

“I'd much rather have a safe place than a perfect-looking place,” she said.

Several parents have offered to pull weeds at Quiet Waters.

Despite Trumbauer's intention to target playgrounds, some worry the bill could have a further reach.

According to Owen McEvoy, a spokesman for County Executive Steve Schuh, the county's Office of Law has said the bill's definition of playgrounds could be interpreted to include sports fields.

McEvoy said the Schuh administration opposes the bill, which he called “overly broad and very expensive to implement.”

Robin Herzberger, a Pasadena mother of four, said spraying at sports fields was the only thing that kept chiggers — small mites that burrow under the skin and cause extreme itching — out of the grass at Loopers Field and the Woods Road complex, where her children play sports.

“If they don't spray, it's a nightmare,” she said.

In the four years since she's been taking her kids to games on both fields, “we've never had an issue with anybody getting sick from what they're spraying,” Herzberger said, “but we've had plenty of people get chiggers.”

Trumbauer said he is working on an amendment to his bill that will clarify that the pesticide ban would only apply to playgrounds.

Concerns about spraying on fields “have nothing at all to do with this” legislation, he said.

The County Council will hold a public hearing on Trumbauer's bill at its next meeting on Nov. 7.