

Park District temporarily lifts pesticide ban until they can . . . Weed Out the Problem

HIGHLAND PARK NEWS

BY CHARLES BERMAN—August 19, 2011

Highland Park, IL - Park District of Highland Park commissioners modified its turf management policies last week by allowing its grounds keepers to again deploy chemical pesticides and herbicides on its playing fields this fall.

Four years ago, the district banned such practices when it launched an Integrated Pest Management program. The progressive move was praised as a model among parks organizations leading a natural lawn-care movement.

The turf-maintenance principles shifted from pesticides to organic, health-conscience techniques, including intensified irrigation, aeration, mowing, over-seeding and other cultural practices to keep the turf in good condition.

Corn gluten meal, which is billed as a natural substitute for synthetic herbicides, was tested in Highland Park, but district officials reported odor problems and limited success. Restaurant-grade vinegar also has been sprayed and determined to be a better alternative to pesticides in some cases.

On Aug. 18, however, park officials reported that the program has likely contributed to the worst field conditions the district has seen in more than a decade.

Ted Baker, the district's director of park operations, said dandelions, clover and other invasive weeds have overrun several district parks. The weeds reportedly represent more than 60 percent of ground coverage at Larry Fink Field and two other parks.



Officials added that the issue has recently become one of the district's most significant sources of complaints, with comments pouring in from general park users and athletic program representatives.

"The fields are getting worse every year," Park District Commissioner Cal Bernstein said. "I think something needs to be done to reverse the trend."

Bernstein described firsthand a difference between current field conditions to what they were four years ago, when the district won awards for its turf health and playability. "I think we need to do something different than we are doing now," he added. "Our fields are deteriorating."

The district will continue to use aspects of the Integrated Pest Management program, but commissioners provided the official go-ahead for grounds crews to apply one round of the previously banned pesticides or herbicides at the three most problematic parks.

Baker said the organic alternatives are still important, but added that the district is at a point where chemicals are needed to complement it in some areas.

"We aren't abandoning (Integrated Pest Management)," he told commissioners.

Signs will be placed around the fields when the chemicals are applied, officials pledged, and progress will be monitored before an official modified turf-management policy will be considered.

