Missoula, Mont. kicks around pesticide regulations

Pesticide issue on Missoula ballot

Will the homeowners in this western Montana mountain city approve a pesticide posting law...for themselves?

- Uhm, should we build a new baseball park?

Or should we make lawn care companies—anybody, in fact, who applies pesticides to more than 50 square feet of property at one time—post 80-square-inch yellow or orange warning signs?

These are the two questions voters of Missoula, Mont., decide this month.

If you’re betting the $3.5 million baseball bond issue generated more debate and controversy—bingo, you win!

“The fact that the city council decided to put baseball on the ballot went on the front page,” says Don Baty, local government reporter for The Missoulian. “The pesticide ordinance story, I think, went on page 3.”

Not that the pesticide posting proposal hadn’t been kicked around city council chambers long enough: it had. It ferment-ed in council’s Conservation Committee for almost a year before being hauled out (much amended) for a mid-August airing.

When council deadlocked 6-6 on the proposed ordinance, Mayor Daniel Kemmis, rather than cast the crucial vote, asked the people of Missoula to decide—while they’re voting on the bond issue for a ballpark which, some townsfolk hope, will attract a minor league baseball team.

At various committee and public hearings, posting advocates and industry representatives (primarily lawn care representatives) debated the pesticide posting issue.

“The hearings were pretty well attended, but there weren’t any overflow crowds either,” Baty tells LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT.

The ordinance finally emerging for the ballot would, if passed, require anybody applying pesticides to 50 square feet or more of property within the city to post signs 24 hours prior to the application and remove them 48 hours after.

Spot spraying (less than 50 square feet) and emergency spraying need not be posted, according to the ordinance.

Greg Amsden, a spokesman for Mont PIRG (Public Interest Research Group), defends the size and color of the signs. He says they should be recognizable by children and contain a “Mr. Yuck” caricature on them along with appropriate warning language.

Mont PIRG is an advocacy organization at the University of Montana directed by elected student representatives. Mont PIRG maintains a professional staff.

Most of the burden for posting, assuming the ordinance passes, is the homeowner’s, says Amsden, adding that posting proponents realized it would create a hardship for lawn application companies to visit each property 24 hours prior to an application.

Apart from the cost to applicators,

—Ron Hall

Missoula is often windy in the spring and early summer when most pesticide applications take place and applicators sometimes don’t know from day to day if they can spray.

“In the course of a year we’ve arrived at quite a few compromises, actually,” Amsden says of the ordinance.