



# Madison's Push for Pesticide-Free Golf Courses

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Several months ago I received a call from a member of Progressive Dane, a powerful Dane-county based political party. They wanted to discuss pesticide-free golf courses. Last month they managed to get the issue of pesticide-free municipal golf courses on the docket of the Madison Parks Commission.

If you haven't been to a public hearing before, the committee goes through items one-by-one, inviting persons to speak to the issue for a limited time period (usually about 3 minutes). The committee may then ask questions of the speaker, otherwise the

speaker is done and sits down. NO ONE from the audience is allowed to participate except during their 3 minute speech.

The beginning speakers represented Progressive Dane. The first was the member who had called me on the phone earlier in the year, and his goal was to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the amount of pesticides used by city golf courses. He proposed starting with Glenway Golf Course, a popular 9-hole course in the center of the city. Glenway, he said, could be a "test" site. The second seemed to be the instigator of the

move to eliminate pesticides on golf courses—a doctor who apparently plays golf and is concerned about the use of pesticides to maintain turf in our country. He discussed pesticides in broad terms related to children's health without giving any specifics. He did mention a golf course in San Francisco that had gone "organic" and no longer used pesticides, instead relying on a compost tea. Earlier in the week the doctor had given a newspaper interview stating that UW-Madison's turf program should be able to assist in the development of management



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programs to allow golf courses to go pesticide-free.

The best prepared speaker of the night was Ray Shane, superintendent of Madison city golf courses. He began by discussing the improper use of the previous speaker's terminology of "organic" by stating that any carbon-containing molecule was by definition "organic". He then discussed the actual amounts of pesticides used on city golf courses (which are relatively little) based on their Integrated Pest Management program. His declaration that simply cutting pesticide use in half was useless without knowing the relative amounts already being used was right on target. Ray discussed the golf course budgets over the past several years given reduced play due to poor weather and economy, combined with increased costs for repairing damage caused by things like this

year's severe winterkill. He then discussed specific diseases such as snow mold and dollar spot, their impact if left unprevented, and the budgetary losses to be incurred as golfers left to play other courses. Ray used his three minutes wisely, and was asked more questions by the committee than any of the speakers, allowing him to get even more points across. A few golfers spoke, one pointedly saying (in response to the doctor's statements) he wasn't concerned about pesticides and kids weren't on the golf course. Another wanted to know why the university hadn't already developed a pesticide-free program at our "sod farm" (I think he meant the O.J. Noer Facility).

Both Wayne Kussow and I spoke briefly about the misconceptions of "organic" golf courses but that if they decided to go this way we were willing to oversee a trial at Glenway. The turf group had met

the previous day to discuss our thoughts on the procedures and practicality of a pesticide-free golf course. Our primary thought was to compare a preventive program with the IPM approach being used and a pesticide-free approach on several holes at Glenway. Geunhwa Jung had agreed to lead the effort. We would have documented the cost of all products including the compost teas and other pesticide replacements as well as surveying golfer's attitudes and thoughts on the turf managed in the different styles.

We were followed by a UW-Madison Hospital doctor who leads a grassroots organization to eliminate chemicals in turf management. Her group had been involved in the earlier effort which led to our local ban on phosphorus-containing turf fertilizers. Her appearance and demeanor were quite professional and she


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seemed to have all her ducks in a row. She opened up by stating a number of studies showed turf pesticides caused a variety of health problems: when asked by the committee if she could provide the actual reports, she said yes. She then went on to say how successful the pesticide-free San Francisco golf course has been due to its reliance on a compost tea and how they would host the PGA tournament there later this year. One of the committee members apparently knew the tournament schedule and quickly interrupted, stating that the San Francisco golf course was definitely not hosting the PGA in 2005. Tap-dance time for the speaker as her credibility crumbled. She left the floor in a whimper instead of the bang I'd anticipated. I doubt she'll make a mistake like that next time.

The remaining speakers were rank and file troops from the anti-pesticide crowd, relatively inarticulate without any new information. That night the Parks Commission voted down the proposal to make Madison's municipal golf courses pesticide-free.

Could such a proposal be successful in your community? I'm not sure it's finished in Madison. How would you respond? Having been to numerous public hearings at both the local and state level, the formula for success varies depending on the politics. In those instances where it truly is a public forum, with the municipality truly seeking information and opinions, those groups which are well organized and articulate hold sway. In those cases, speakers have well thought-out statements, sometimes which they read from paper, following one after another. Sometimes the matter seems to be predetermined, in which case those groups (which again are well organized) "lobbied" behind the scenes early on. Without suggesting the need to formally lobby,

every golf course superintendent needs to be involved at the community level to provide information. People fear the unknown.

Let your local media and community know you are a professional expert on turf management. Your efforts could range from agreeing to do a television interview about the opening of the golf season to contacting local media asking them to prepare a news release. Jerry Kershasky did just this in March when he coordinated the winterkill symposium at Westmoor Country Club. One of the easiest ways to get information out is simply to be active in your community and be prepared to provide ad hoc information. If a parent attending the same high school football game as you comments about the health effects of pesticides, be prepared to state that the acute toxicity of today's turf pesticides is comparable to table salt and aspirin.

When someone states the local lakes are again full of algae because of all the lawn fertilizers, be prepared to state that turf is actually a great buffer to prevent urban runoff, and research shows the majority of P entering lakes comes from bare soil, usually from agricultural or construction sites.

I'm frequently asked for data and information on the environmental effects of turf. We are fortunate to have a lot of information available to us in the turf industry. Options to get this information include sources such as the on-line data base Turfgrass Information File ([www.lib.msu.edu/tgif](http://www.lib.msu.edu/tgif)), the USGA Green Section, and GCSAA. John Marshall Clark at Massachusetts will soon be publishing data from a study he's conducted to determine the amount of pesticide exposure golfers have while golfing. Dr. Clark is a toxicologist by training and has been working in pesticide toxicology for some time. The USGA has been

funding the work and I look forward to his presentation I'll see later this month, followed by publication sometime in the next year or so in a scientific journal. Of course, the gist of his results will be published by USGA in their on-line TERO journal this year. I expect this work to become a standard reference.

At UW-Madison, we've published a number of studies in the Wisconsin Turf Reports over the years on products and management practices that reduce the need for pesticides. We've also tried a lot of products that simply don't work. Some of the information will be used for a presentation by Paul Koch and Jacob Schneider, UW turf graduate students who have several years of golf course experience, at the upcoming WTA Expo. Look for additional information on the use and effectiveness of alternative approaches to turf management during the rest of the year in *The Grass Roots*. ♣

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