

Vermont firm lives with city regulation

Peter Harrison opposed Burlington, Vermont's pesticide regulations, but they passed anyway. Then he grew his Lawnmark site in spite of the roadblock.

■ If they didn't plow Main Street in Burlington, it would make an incredible ski jump. Launch from the picture-postcard hill of the University of Vermont campus and rocket down through a mile of bustling, European-style stores and shops. *Whoosh*, given a stout heart and a steady backwind, who knows, even the green, quiet hills of New York across frozen, blue Lake Champlain seem almost reachable.

But at least one person in this community in northern Vermont—expert skier that he is—says things could be better.

Peter Harrison, 33, is learning to live with a ridiculous pesticide-use ordinance. A slightly built, athletic, intense man with bristling energy, Harrison manages the Lawnmark operation in Burlington, one of several Lawnmark locations in the Northeast and New England purchased by, and being folded into, \$100-million-a-year Barefoot Grass very soon.

Harrison—it's his Yankee upbringing—doesn't mince words.

"It's a real pain in the butt," says Pete of the ordinance the city adopted, over his strenuous objections, prior to the start of the 1993 season. "The ordinance says we have to pre-notify, by letter and at least 24 hours in advance, any abutting neighbor of any property we're going to treat."

Even so, the company he manages grew last year.

The regulations, in fact, cover *anybody* applying pesticides within Burlington, leading to the curious spectacle of one of the ordinance's chief sponsors himself being discovered breaking the law. "Can you believe it?" asks Harrison rhetorically.

Many homeowners, says Harrison, disregard the ordinance. But Harrison says his branch won't test the law. He intends to work within its requirements. He keeps records to prove that he does.

He says he warned his 500 or so customers inside the city limits that the ordinance, if passed, would result in higher prices. "I sent two letters to our customers



and informed them about the ordinance and what it meant. I asked them for their support, and for them to voice their concerns too," he recalls. But the controversy stirred little community interest. Efforts to raise a pesticide users group never really materialized either.

Few customers within the city seemed to care at all—that is, until Harrison informed them that he had to charge \$8.75 more per application to fulfill the requirements of the ordinance. The company, then known as Nature's Helper, had to do all the paperwork and extra mailings by hand, says Harrison. Once it had been acquired by Lawnmark and computerized, however, he could drop the extra cost down to \$2 extra per application.

"Vermonters won't waste money," says Harrison, a native himself and a 1983 graduate of University of Vermont. "They definitely want to see some value when they spend their money."

As if the prenotification clause weren't bother enough though, the ordinance also prohibits using any pesticides within 500 feet of Lake Champlain. Some of the city's nicest homes sit on the scenic lakeshore. Homeowners there can select an all-natural program, a fertilizer-only program, or they can do their own lawn care.

Harrison says the city added the provision in spite of being informed of research done by Dr. Tom Watschke at Penn State (and others) documenting turf's role as a biological filter.

In spite of the turmoil of the ordinance, the branch that Harrison manages remains healthy and growing, with sales of

Snow usually doesn't leave the University of Vermont campus until late in spring. When it does, Peter Harrison and his Lawnmark crew arrive at daybreak to fertilize and treat the UVM Commons before a.m. classes start.

\$½-\$1 million. That's in spite of three name changes involving two different owners the past three years. Consider also that Harrison, in lawn care nine years, converted the program from liquid to primarily granular.

Harrison's branch market extends northeast over Lake Champlain to Plattsburgh, N.Y., and to Montpelier about 40 miles in the other direction. Harrison says his seven employees (including two office workers) cover a lot of hilly, rural territory.

He credits the growing popularity of the company's tree and shrub program, and stronger commercial sales for the branch's success. Most of all, he says the branch thrives because of the "tremendous effort" of its employees.

"Everybody puts in more than their time," says Harrison who, himself, regularly logs 14-hour days once the season starts. (The last two years his location couldn't even start its first round because of snow until April 20.)

That's another reason why neither he, nor his comrades, could defeat the pesticide laws. They were stretched too thin.

"It was a learning experience," he admits with a shrug. "I got to see how the political process works. I found out you need all the help you can get."

—Ron Hall