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New Legislation to Curb the Poisoning of Philly Public Lands

On September 10, 2020, in her role as Chair of City Council’s Health and Human Services Committee, 8th District City Councilmember Cindy Bass introduced bill #200425, titled “Healthy Outdoor Public Spaces” to halt the use of toxic herbicides on publicly owned grounds, including Philadelphia parks, playgrounds, sports fields, and recreation centers. The bill will also establish a transparent and public reporting requirement for all pesticides applied by the city or its contractors. Currently, the public is not informed what toxic pesticides are sprayed where, and in what amounts.

The legislation was developed in partnership with Toxic Free Philly, a growing coalition of concerned residents and allied organizations whose professional expertise includes public health, medicine, ecological restoration, public administration, stakeholder engagement, environmental law and policy, and urban ecology.

With this ordinance, Philadelphia will join over 104 municipalities across the country that have prohibited or severely restricted toxic herbicides. Last year, SEPTA announced all staff and contractors will halt any use of glyphosate, the active ingredient in the herbicide Roundup.

“We are so happy to work with Councilmember Bass on this legislation, and that the city is responding to this other public health crisis, happening in tandem with and exacerbating COVID-19,” said Toxic Free Philly member Sadie Francis. “This effort is part of our commitment to the larger environmental justice movement.”

As the pandemic unfolds, we’re seeing the disparate impacts of the virus on lower income communities of color due to the widespread inequities that have long undermined the health of these communities. In addition, a large body of independent research strongly suggests that many of these toxic chemicals can weaken our immune systems, making park users even more vulnerable to the virus. Currently, the city uses at least 18 toxic herbicides on its public grounds, including glyphosate. 2,4-D, an active ingredient in Agent Orange, part of the US’s chemical warfare program during the Vietnam War, is also sprayed.

Dr. Linda Stern, formerly of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center and a member of Toxic Free Philly, stated, “there is overwhelming evidence that pesticides cause numerous health conditions including asthma, cancer, developmental and learning disabilities, nerve and immune system damage, liver and kidney damage, reproductive impairment, birth defects, and disruption of the endocrine system and the gut microbiome. Pregnant women and children are particularly vulnerable to pesticide toxins.”

The National Cancer Institute estimates that Philadelphia has the highest cancer rate of any large city in the United States, and asthma hospitalization rates are three times higher in Philadelphia than in the rest of Pennsylvania, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Health. Over the past few years, new information from the scientific community and the courts has emerged proving that our reliance on toxic herbicides has only led to deterioration of the health of communities and the environment.

“With this effort, Philadelphia takes an important step in moving toward even healthier and cleaner green spaces,” adds Councilmember Cindy Bass. “This year especially, our communities are turning to their public parks, fields and playgrounds more than ever before. We must prioritize their health and safety of our communities, particularly our underserved communities.”

The ordinance has been assigned to the Health and Human Services Committee, with hearings set for the morning of October 13th.

The bill is being cosponsored by Councilmembers Cherelle Parker, Curtis Jones, Isiah Thomas, Allan Domb, Katherine Gilmore-Richardson, Kenyatta Johnson, Jaime Gautier, and Kendra Brooks.



Pictured: Councilmember Bass and staff member Rodnie Jamison, with Toxic Free Philly member Kris Soffa Photo credit: Sadie Francis