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Drama at School Board over Pesticide Use

By Cathy Tyson

Supporters of a more organic approach to weed and insect problems at Acalanes Union High School District schools got a blistering response from school board members responding to what they perceived as some of the tactics of the group. A social media site featured misinformation about the topic, in a posting by a student - that posting was promptly removed.

"To think that we are not concerned about 5,300 students is appalling to me," said longtime school board member Tom Mulvaney, getting emotional. "That kind of rhetoric is uncalled for. I'm really disappointed."

Striking a more conciliatory tone the newest member of the board, Nancy Kendzierski, asked that the dialogue be tamped down, which will be more helpful in reaching a solution. Chair Kathy Coppersmith was also clear, stating she was "very unhappy" with the way the situation has been handled.

"I believe the district has been very progressive," said Chris Learned, associate superintendent, explaining that the district is using the least toxic methods and has adopted an Integrated Pest Management program that focuses on long term prevention or suppression of pest problems through a combination of strategies. IPM does not eliminate the use of chemical pesticides, but instead uses them only when needed.

In his staff report, Learned outlined the current landscaping maintenance situation. "No chemical was used on any campus this year." The last time Round Up was sprayed, it was in April of 2013, only during spring break when school was not in session and only along the perimeter of the fence. It was slated to be used again during the 2014 spring break - weather permitting; however it rained, so no application was made.

"Unfortunately the current policy is inadequate and incomplete," said Carol Shenon in a statement to the board. She described suggested changes as "essential to safeguard and protect the health of students, staff and the community." She and fellow supporters would like to have an IPM Advisory Committee to develop guidelines and oversee the IPM policy and program. They would also like a 'banned' and 'approved' use product list and a 'limited use' products provision.

Susan JunFish, of Parents for a Safer Environment, described the situation at the meeting as misdirected anger at the web-post and an online petition that her group wasn't responsible for. "It certainly was not our intention to make the district look bad or to distribute information that is not correct. Our objective is to work with the district to see where improvements can be made to the current IPM policy."

Nothing was decided as the meeting concluded, but in follow-up conversations Learned told JunFish that he plans to send a copy of the draft IPM updated language for comments to Parents for a Safer Environment before sending it to the board in June. Calling the dust up "a major misunderstanding," Learned explained that the district has significant problems with its athletic fields, which become a safety issue for the district. Going forward, the district plans to do its homework and evaluate options, said Learned.

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