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AUHSD Declines to Change Policy on Herbicide/Pesticide Use

By Sophie Braccini

The Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) reviewed its pesticide and herbicide policy during its May 5th Board meeting. Parents for a Safer Environment (PfSE), a local grass roots organization that has been working with the District since September 2008, met with some success a year ago when the District agreed to stop using most of the pesticides and herbicides that the group considers harmful. The herbicide Roundup has remained in use, and the Board decided to go with staff's recommendation to continue using the product. The Board also did not consider tightening the rules used by the District when choosing new pesticides or herbicides.

Speaking to the Board, Dr. Joanne Perron, Obstetrician/Gynecologist and postdoctoral fellow at UC San Francisco's Program on Reproductive Health and the Environment (PRHE), explained that according to the Institute's research, infertility is linked to exposure to chemicals and children and adolescents are a particularly vulnerable population. "Toxicity testing has also shown that together, the active and inert ingredients of the popular product Roundup have greater endocrine effects than Roundup's active ingredient, Glyphosate alone does."

Doctor Rachele Halpern, an endocrinologist and mother of two Miramonte High School students, explained that all chemicals are potential endocrine disruptors, meaning that substances children are exposed to could interfere with the hormonal systems that regulate anything in the body from growth to reproduction. "The Endocrine Society recommended the adoption of the precautionary principal stating that something is unsafe until proven not so," she said. Moraga's Vice-Mayor Karen Mendonca, who took the stand next, asked the District to apply the same principal, and explained how the Town of Moraga decided years ago to ban the use of all pesticides and herbicides in all parks where children are present.

Staff responded to the presentation by saying that many other school districts do not enforce a more restrictive policy than they do. They challenged the idea that they did not care about exposing children to dangerous chemicals, "We do care about the students," said Business Services Associate Superintendent Chris Learned, "and we have tried alternatives to Roundup, but nothing seems to be killing weeds effectively."

Board Member Tom Mulvaney asked if any alternative could be found to spraying. "If we didn't do anything and let the weeds grow where the fences are and on edges where we can't use a machine it would be ugly," said Maintenance Director Steve Fishbaugh. Board President Vanessa Crews recommended that alternative planting be proposed for hills that would cover ground and not require spraying.

After one parent said he had not been informed of spraying at Campolindo during Spring Break, although he had opted in to the notification system so that he could instruct his children to avoid sprayed areas, Board members asked questions about how parents are notified. Staff responded that they followed the legal requirement to post signs at the entrance to the site. It was not clear which parents were receiving email notices of spraying and what the procedure was to get such notices. The Board asked that staff report once a year on chemical use during a public session.

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