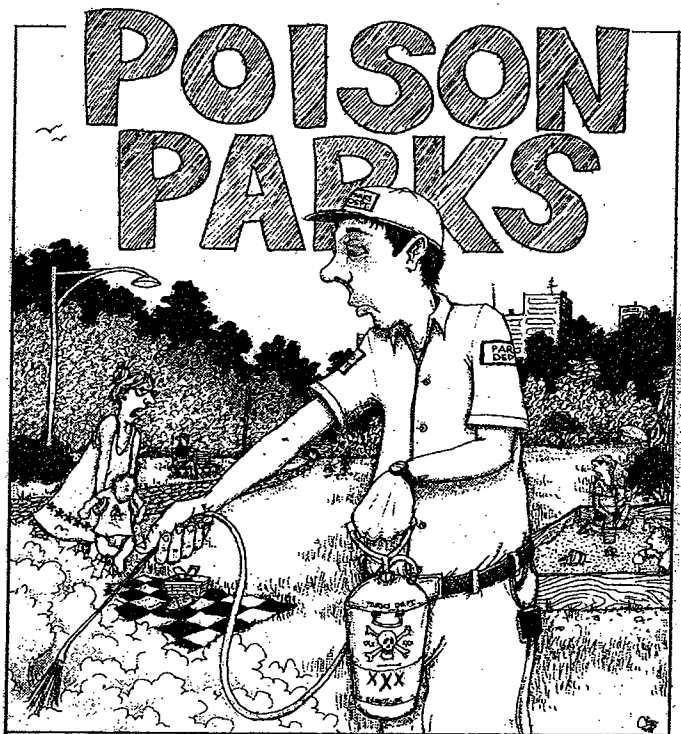


# Parks are for People, not Poisons:

## The Story of the San Francisco Pesticide Campaign

Gregg Small

*In October 1996, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted an ordinance which will ban the use of most toxic pesticides in San Francisco by the year 2000. Numerous environmental organizations, health advocates, and concerned citizens rallied together in support of this precedent-setting initiative. The passing of the San Francisco ordinance is a powerful example of proactive, effective activism, and it will undoubtedly serve as a template for other communities around the nation which are committed to removing the toxic threat of pesticides from their lives.*



**I**n October, 1996, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to pass a landmark pesticide ordinance to protect children and others from the hazards of pesticides in public facilities. This ordinance was the result of a tremendous effort on the part of many individuals and organizations who believe that we need to put an end to poisons in our communities. What began for us as a campaign to reduce pesticide use in San Francisco parks, resulted in passage of the toughest pesticide ordinance in the country; an achievement which far exceeded our wildest dreams. We have received calls from all over the world and across the United States from people who want to pass similar ordinances in their communities. This document is meant to serve as a guide for those interested in reducing pesticide use in their local communities.

The major provisions of the ordinance, which apply to all San Francisco departments, include:

- ▶ An immediate ban of the most toxic pesticides, including Toxic Category I pesticides, all pesticides listed under California's Prop 65 as known carcinogens or reproductive toxins, and all pesticides listed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as known, possible or probable carcinogens.
- ▶ A 50% reduction in cumulative pesticide use from 1996 to 1998.
- ▶ Notification of all pesticide use four days prior and after an application.
- ▶ Development of an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program by all city departments, with assistance from an IPM expert.
- ▶ A complete ban of all pesticide use by the year 2000.

## The Campaign

Below is a summary of some of the San Francisco's major components. Many of these steps will be useful for activists in other communities.

### 1. Research and documentation of the problem

Working with Green Corps, our first step was producing a report documenting the pesticide problem in San Francisco. In California, we are fortunate to have the most comprehensive use reporting system in the nation. With some significant exceptions, pesticide applications must be reported to the county agricultural commissioner's office. This information is public record. We went to their office and made copies of all pesticide use by the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department from December 1994-November 1995. We chose to target Rec and Park because they use large quantities of pesticides. We found they were using over 60 different pesticides, including 26 suspected of causing cancer and 20 suspected of causing reproductive harm.

After obtaining the information, Green Corps and Pesticide Watch Education Fund compiled a report entitled, "An Evaluation of San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department's Pest Control Program." The report laid out the dangers of pesticide use, specifically highlighted pesticide use by the Rec and Park Department, and discussed alternatives to chemical pest management. The report also included an appendix listing all pesticides used by the Department during the time period examined, the amounts used, and the environmental and public health risks associated with their use.

### 2. Establishment of clear goals

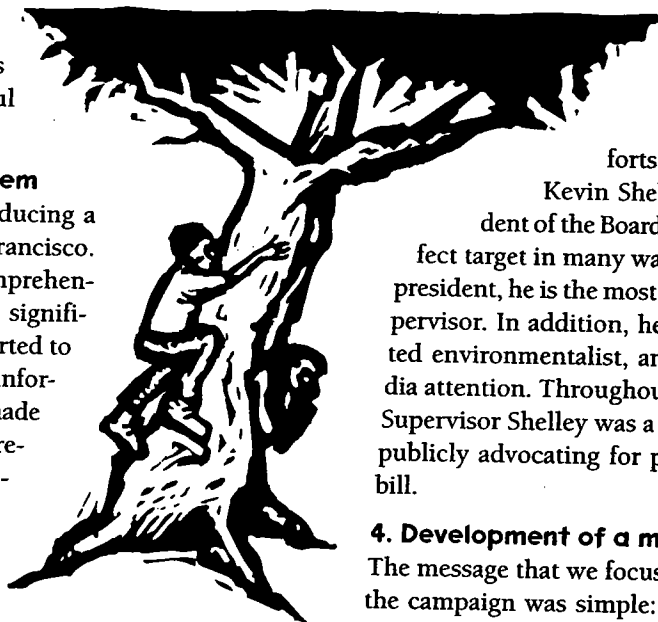
Once we understood the magnitude of the problem, we knew we wanted to focus our energies on ending this toxic hazard. We established a platform, calling on the City of San Francisco to:

- ▶ Ban the worst pesticides.
- ▶ Commit to a 50% reduction by volume of their overall pesticide use by the year 1998.
- ▶ Hire an outside consultant to assist current staff in learning new nontoxic alternatives to deal with pest problems.
- ▶ Require pre- and post- notification of all pesticide applications.
- ▶ Adopt a written policy which prioritizes non-toxic alternative pest control.

This platform eventually became the foundation of the ordinance.

### 3. Effective targeting

We chose to target the San Francisco Board of Supervisors because they ultimately had the power to pass an ordinance that would help us adopt our platform. The Board in San Francisco is made up of 11 members, and we needed a majority to successfully pass the ordinance. After talking with individuals who knew the make-up of the Board and brainstorming



potential targets, we chose to direct our efforts at Supervisor

Kevin Shelley, the President of the Board. He was a perfect target in many ways because, as president, he is the most influential supervisor. In addition, he is a committed environmentalist, and enjoys media attention. Throughout the process, Supervisor Shelley was a powerful ally, publicly advocating for passage of the bill.

### 4. Development of a message

The message that we focused on during the campaign was simple: **PESTICIDES ARE A THREAT TO OUR HEALTH AND**

**THE ENVIRONMENT.**

We stuck to this simple message throughout the campaign, reinforcing the fact that the city was using hazardous pesticides which are linked to cancer, neurological problems, birth defects, and reproductive disorders. This message worked well. Later in the campaign, a community activist coined the phrase "Parks are for people, not poisons," a brilliant slogan that we eventually used in many of our outreach efforts.

### 5. Public education

Before the campaign began, there was little awareness in San Francisco about the hazards posed by pesticide in parks and other public areas. We launched a major public education drive targeted at the media, policy makers, and the general public. We

used the following tactics to educate the public:

- ▶ Media. We organized a press conference to release the report, which received excellent coverage in print, radio, and television.
- ▶ Group presentations. We made presentations to a wide range of organizations and civic groups, informing them of the problem and the campaign.
- ▶ Petitioning. We petitioned throughout San Francisco, primarily at universities, grocery stores, events, and other locations with heavy foot traffic. This was an excellent way to inform people about the problem. The most successful petitioning location was near Golden Gate Park. We collected nearly 2000 signatures.
- ▶ Flyers. We handed out flyers with information about the campaign and upcoming events in neighborhoods surrounding Golden Gate Park.
- ▶ Letters-to-the-editor. Many coalition members and community members submitted letters informing people of the campaign and the toxic hazards associated with pesticide use in parks.

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**"Parks are for people,  
not poisons"**

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## 6. Recruitment of a strong grassroots base

From its conception, we knew the campaign would only be successful if there was a large grassroots base of support for pesticide use reduction. We worked closely with a core of individuals and organizations, including Green Corps, students from San Francisco State, the San Francisco Green Party, the Grey Panthers, the San Francisco League of Conservation Voters, Pesticide Action Network, the Southeast Alliance for Environmental Justice, and many others, to build our base. Green Corps played the leading role in the campaign, with one organizer working full-time on it.

We used a number of recruitment tactics, including several that were critical components of the public education effort. The two most successful tactics were petitioning, which helped us identify community members who were interested in heightened involvement, and group presentations, which engaged more organizations in the effort.

## 7. Coalition building

One of the most successful components of the campaign was the development of the Bay Area Beyond Pesticides coalition. The coalition was dedicated to achieving the goals of the campaign. In total, 30 organizations were involved in the coalition, ranging from environmental organizations such as NRDC and Greenpeace to public health advocates like Breast Cancer Action and the Children's Council of San Francisco. The coalition also included community groups like the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council and the Southeast Alliance for Environmental Justice. Coalition members participated in various activities, including petitioning, letter writing, making phone calls to Supervisors, speaking at press events, and testifying at hearings.

## 8. Media

The extensive media coverage of the campaign was undoubtedly one of the key elements to its success. We received initial coverage with the release of our Parks report. But that was just the beginning. On June 9, 1996, The San Francisco Examiner, placed the pesticide story on the front page of its Sunday edition. The newspaper had done an in-depth analysis of all pesticide use in the City, significantly expanding on the information provided in our report on the parks. This led to a series of other press stories, including an editorial in favor of the campaign in The San Francisco Examiner, an opinion piece written by Huey Johnson,

a member of the coalition, and extensive coverage of all the committee hearings on the ordinance.

## 9. Lining up our votes

We met with every member of the Board of Supervisors before voting on the ordinance took place. Our intention was to educate them about the problem and demonstrate the strong grassroots support for pesticide reform. At the meetings, we presented Supervisors with copies of the petition, the report, and a list of coalition members. These meetings were critical in determining where each Supervisor stood on the issue and educating them about pesticide problems.

## 10. Turn-out at the hearings

There were a number of public hearings on the ordinance that were critical to passage. Initial hearings were held in the Spring of 1996 on a reso-

lution that urged the Rec and Park Department to implement an Integrated Pest Management program and laid the groundwork for the hearings on the actual ordinance. At all of these hearings, we worked with coalition partners and community activists to turn out large numbers of people to demonstrate public support for pesticide use reduction. Bob van Holt, an activist with the San Francisco Green Party, designed green

cut-outs that supporters wore on their shirts that stated our slogan, "Parks are for People, not Poisons."

## 11. Neutralizing the opposition

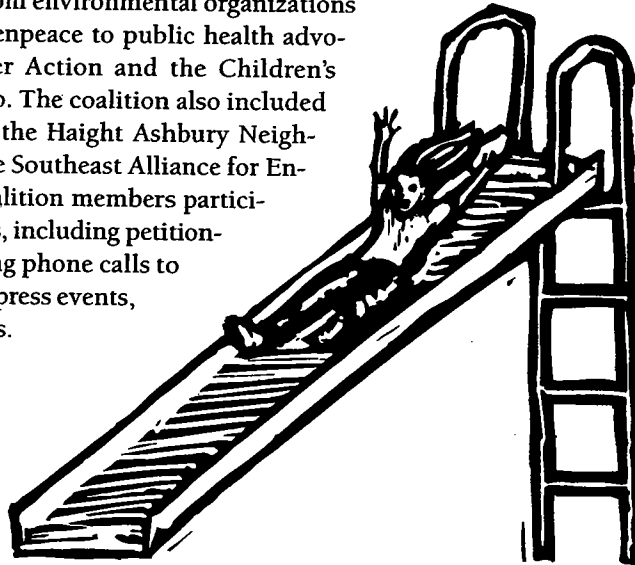
Interestingly enough, we faced little opposition during this campaign, despite the dramatic impact it would have on the way we manage pests in San Francisco. Industry was largely absent from the debate. The only opposition they showed was in the form of testimony at one hearing and a letter to the editor of The San Francisco Examiner written by a representative of the Western Crop Association that defended Roundup, a common herbicide manufactured by Monsanto.

City departments, particularly Recreation and Park, were the biggest opponents for change. Their opposition stemmed from institutional inertia, a problem which plagues many bureaucratic institutions afraid of changing practices they have been engaged in for years. Prior to the passage of the ordinance, the common approach to pest management by Rec and Park and most other government agencies was to "spray and pray," whether there was a pest problem or not. The concept of alternatives was foreign to them.

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## Implementation

Since the ordinance was passed last October, we have worked closely with government officials and agencies to ensure that this policy does not sit on a shelf, but rather effectively reduces pesticide use in San Francisco. Our goal now is to ensure that San Francisco becomes a model city in urban pesticide use reduction.

Moving from passage of the original ordinance to its implementation has taught us many lessons which may prove useful for other community activists working on similar campaigns. This section is designed to outline our experiences with the implementation of the ordinance. We recognize that implementation is a critical component of ensuring that good policies result in real change.

### 1. Establish a committee to oversee implementation

A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) has been established to help with the transition from chemical pest management to IPM. The TAC is chaired by the county agricultural commissioner, and also includes the President of the San Francisco Board of the environment, Pesticide Watch Education Fund, an IPM expert, and representatives from many of the major SF city departments which will be impacted by the new law.

To date, this panel has been tremendously successful at identifying potential problems with implementation and finding creative solutions to these challenges. Most importantly, by bringing everybody together, it has created mutual sense of responsibility for making the ordinance work. This is one of the most important elements for success, because without support from all impacted parties, success will be limited.

### 2. Get technical experts to help with the transition

The policy passed in San Francisco represents a monumental

change in the way pests are managed, and requires a tremendous amount of education and cooperation in order to be effective. Most of the city staff responsible for managing pests are unfamiliar with alternative methods of pest control. They need help learning alternative methods. Simply stopping the use of pesticides, without determining what alternatives exist, will not solve pest problems and may result in adverse public health impacts.

Fortunately, there is a wealth of information available about non-toxic alternatives to pest control. There are a number of excellent books (*Common Sense Pest Control* by Sheila Daar and William and Helga Olkowski is the best), and experts across the nation who can help with this transition.

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### 3. Address the money issue

In San Francisco, there have been costs associated with switching to IPM. The reality is, it may cost money in the short-term to make the transition. Some initial costs include buying new equipment and hiring IPM experts to work with staff. In the long-run, there may be some significant financial savings for the City in decreased chemical bills. Of course, if we looked at the broader costs, an IPM program saves money in reduced environmental clean-up and decreased hospital bills for those affected by the poisons.

*Gregg Small is the director of Pesticide Watch Education Fund, a statewide education and advocacy organization dedicated to reducing pesticide use in California and promoting non-toxic alternatives.*

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