

Let crews cross lines to spray trash: health officer

Community group upset that top official will consider issuing health warning for growing garbage, but not order its removal

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Toronto's medical officer of health will order the city to break protest lines and spray insecticide on mounting piles of garbage in Christie Pits before he recommends the rubbish be removed.

In a politely worded message to residents and union members blocking city-hired pesticide workers from treating the temporary dump, Dr. David McKeown said he would consider issuing a health hazard order if their actions continue.

Such orders legally compel the city to act as directed, and were used by the province in 2002 as grounds to end the last strike.

But residents hoping Dr. McKeown would use the power to help rid their park of its temporary garbage-site status shouldn't hold their breath.

“At this time, I don't contemplate ordering the removal of garbage in the near term. It would be more likely that we'd order the city to carry out an effective pest-control program,” Dr. McKeown said.

“We're in an extraordinary situation here. ... There's odour, there's accumulations of garbage, there's increased traffic. We need to manage this situation in a way which minimizes the risk to public health.”

But a spokesman for the protesters who have been blocking access to Christie Pits said even when the city used pesticides during the 2002 strike, the community was still hit with a rat infestation that didn't clear out for months.

“As a group, we've lost faith in the medical officer of health,” said Govind Rao, a member of Friends of Christie Pits, the community group that has co-ordinated the protests at the dump site.

“We fully supported the city when it banned pesticide use in city parks [in 2003], we just don't understand how they can now turn around and apply even worse chemicals in greater concentrations in the ice rink, and have those flow out into the surrounding community,” he said.

Mr. Rao said his group will take its own samples of what is leaking out of the garbage bags to an independent lab for testing.

The public health impacts of the strike by CUPE Local 79 and 416 members – now in its 12th day – stretch far beyond the fences surrounding the 19 temporary garbage drop-off sites.

Routine restaurant inspections have been cancelled. Usually, the department of public health would carry out “quite a few ... probably dozens a day,” a spokeswoman said. Now, managers are responding only to complaints.

The city's 15 sexual health clinics and 11 dental clinics are closed, and The Works drop-in needle exchange in the public health building at Yonge-Dundas Square is also closed.

Meanwhile, water quality testing at the city's 11 swimming beaches has either been drastically curtailed or cancelled altogether.

While lifeguards remain on duty at all beaches, water quality testing at Sunnyside Beach, Cherry Beach, Woodbine Beaches, Kew-Balmy Beach, and Bluffer's Park Beach is only being done twice-weekly, as opposed to daily.

Testing is not being done at Rouge Beach, Marie Curtis Park East, Hanlan's Point, Gibraltar Point Beach, Centre Island, and Ward's Island.

“We ask people to swim at their own risk. We are warning that after heavy rains the risk increases,” the department spokeswoman said. “We are trying to provide all of our critical services. The beaches are a lower-risk service.”

Dr. McKeown would not discuss whether these changes endanger the general health of Torontonians.

But he did say managers and non-union staff were “working very hard under difficult circumstances” to maintain critical public health services.

“At this point, we're doing what we need to be doing,” he said. “I think we're all looking forward to having our colleagues who are members of the union rejoin us.”

Cool weather has helped keep the insect population down, but Dr. McKeown insisted the pesticide workers must be given access to Christie Pits soon. If managed properly, Dr. McKeown said the temporary garbage sites could operate safely “for some time.”

With files from Dakshana Bascaramurty