

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 18, 2005

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Austin Bans Use of Coal Tar Sealants - First in Nation

Thursday night the City of Austin became the first city in the country to ban the use of coal tar sealants. National attention is now focused on this issue as other cities are finding significant increases in PAH levels in their streams.

Council Member Lee Leffingwell's proposal to ban pavement products containing coal tar in the city limits and its ETJ (Extra Territorial Jurisdiction) was unanimously approved by the Austin City Council on November 17, 2005. The ban will take effect January 1, 2006.

Pavement sealants are surface finishes for parking lots, driveways and airport runways that can provide an attractive and protective barrier coat from weather and chemicals.

The City has banned the coal tar-based products because they are a potent source of PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons), an organic contaminant known to be carcinogenic and toxic to aquatic life. One of the ingredients in significant quantities is included in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) list of 12 Persistent Bioaccumulative and Toxic Chemicals (PBT). According to the EPA, "PBTs are highly toxic, long-lasting substances that can build up in the food chain to levels that are harmful to human and ecosystem health." One researcher from MD Anderson Cancer Center, Dr. Robin Fuchs-Young, also spoke in favor of the ban saying, "There is no reason to put additional carcinogens into the environment if a less toxic alternative is available."

Research conducted by the City of Austin and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) indicates PAH-containing particles are washing off sealed parking lots and into area creeks. Work conducted by the USGS indicates that parking lot sealants may represent a major portion of PAHs in streams studied. City research indicates that the coal tar-sealants are toxic to aquatic life and degrade stream communities.

Alternative sealants that do not contain coal tar are available in the Austin area. Although they contain PAHs, the chemical is significantly lower in PAH concentrations and less toxic than coal tar-containing products.

Now that the ban has been approved, the City will be providing information on enforcement and product disposal as it becomes available. The history of the PAH issue, supporting research and alternative products are currently listed on the City's website at http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/watershed/coaltar_main.htm. Citizens wishing to purchase a pavement sealant from a retailer or hire a sealant applicator are advised to request a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) to verify the product does not contain coal tar.