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Weed whackers to replace herbicides for Montpelier rail line

By [Gina Conn](#)

STAFF WRITER

MONTPELIER — Officials have prohibited herbicide spraying on a populated segment of the two-mile stretch of railroad that runs through the capital. Weed whackers will instead be used to eliminate the weeds in that area.

The effected segment is the railroad right-of-way between Main Street and Granite Street, not the entire two-mile stretch. This compromise was the end result of an agreement between Montpelier and Washington County Railroad Friday addressing concerns about weed control along the rail line.

Tree Board Chairman John Snell, a vocal proponent of the herbicide spraying for over a year, is not happy with this outcome. "Something doesn't add up to me," he said.

Snell said he doesn't like the agreement for two reasons. One, that it doesn't include the whole stretch that runs through town. "Secondly, it sounds to me like it's really just a stall of action. There's no protocol of determining a long-term strategy."

Snell said from what he knows — stressing he is no expert — weed whackers will not sufficiently get rid of the weeds.

For the past month, Montpelier citizens have expressed outrage at the idea of chemical spraying through the center of town. Because of the number of concerned residents reaching out to Mayor John Hollar, a heated emergency meeting was held on June 24 at City Hall.

At that meeting, the idea of weed whacking was proposed by Montpelier residents. When resident Fran Weinbaum suggested residents with weed whackers as an alterative, Eric Benson, an attorney representing the Vermont Rail System responded that wasn't possible because the right-of-way is regulated so that only rail workers can do work on it.

Vermont's Secretary of Agriculture Chuck Ross attended the meeting to listen to comments, and in turn signed an amendment in early July delaying the effective date the Vermont Rail System could begin spraying. Ross signed the amended permit Thursday, and said the plan addressed concerns of both residents and the railway. Now, rail workers will be doing just what Weinbaum suggested.

"I am very pleased the city and railroad have worked together to find a solution," Ross said.

Hollar said the railroad understood operational concerns and was willing to be flexible and come to an agreement. "This is a good outcome for both city residents and the railroad," he said.

This compromise is only for the summer of 2015.

"This is a one-time agreement that allows us the time to see if there are viable long-term alternatives," Hollar said. According to the agreement, the state will look into a more thorough review of vegetation control practices in hopes that this will be resolved.

The agreement also states that railroad workers will be operating the weed whackers, but the city will bear the direct expense of the labor and equipment. City Manager William Fraser said this does not include the

purchase of weed whackers, but instead an hourly rate for operation.

Snell was not happy with this aspect of the agreement.

"I'm discouraged that the city has to bear the cost," he said.

When asked what outcome he would like Snell replied, "Anything proposed should be first tested on a small scale to make sure it meets the need of the railroad."

The original permit was issued in May by Ross at the recommendation of Vermont's Pesticide Advisory Council (VPAC). That permit allowed the railroad to apply glyphosate to the area of track that runs through Montpelier, a practice done since 1999 with the exception of last year. Weeds are removed because plants can get stuck in the wheels of the rail car.

The agreement is expected to be formalized at Wednesday's City Council meeting.

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