

County Leaders Debate What to do With LA's Unused Drugs

SoCal Patch



By **ELIZABETH MARCELLINO**

LOS ANGELES, CA - The Board of Supervisors postponed a vote Tuesday on a proposed ordinance that would require pharmaceutical companies to develop programs for the collection and disposal of unused drugs and syringes.

Supervisor Michael Antonovich, who championed the ordinance, recommended that the vote be postponed until June 14 to give environmentalists, pharmaceutical companies, retailers and other interested parties more time to reach agreement.

"It is important that the county make take-back options available to the public as soon as possible," Antonovich said.

Supervisor Don Knabe agreed with Antonovich that time was growing short to resolve the issue.

"It's getting a little old," Knabe said of a series of postponements. "The two sides need to come together and work something out."

Once an ordinance is adopted, it will take 30 days to become effective. As currently drafted, manufacturers would then have a year to develop and implement a program, Antonovich said.

Several pharmacies have expressed interest in more immediate solutions, offering to host take-back events,

collection bins and mail-back services. Walgreen's announced a plan last month to install in-store kiosks for drug disposal in select California stores.

At issue are medications that go unused and end up either being flushed down toilets or are abused by individuals who don't have a prescription for the drugs.

Vishnu Subramaniam of the California Alliance for Retired Americans spoke in support of a take-back ordinance.

"Seniors have no place to take their unused and expired medication," Subramaniam said. "They're worried about their children and children getting into their medicine cabinet."

Advocates say 40 percent of all medications go unused and are helping to fuel an epidemic of prescription drug addiction.

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Of the 8,265 drug-related deaths in Los Angeles County from 2000-2009, 61 percent involved a commonly abused prescription or over-the-counter drug, according to the county's Department of Public Health.

The number of deaths each year from prescription opioids such as oxycodone, hydrocodone and codeine now outpace deaths from heroin, cocaine and benzodiazepine drugs combined, according to the county's top health official.

Officials once urged residents to dispose of unused medications down the drain or in the trash.

However, concerns have been raised about trace levels of pharmaceuticals making their way into water supplies and residents are now advised to take unused drugs to drop boxes at sheriff's stations or drop them at hazardous waste centers.

Syringes or "sharps" are also an issue.

A Heal the Bay representative brought the board photographs of needles floating onto Dockweiler Beach following a heavy rain.

A board member for the California Product Stewardship Council said the "sharps" pose other risks.

"It's a public health issue. We have a lot of recycling workers that have been stuck with needles. We have workers around hospitals who find them in parking lots. We have park workers who are finding them in public places, in airports," Kreigh Hampel said.

Pharmaceutical manufacturers proposed educational outreach about disposal as an alternative to requiring companies to take back drugs.

The owner of a medical waste management site said he was required by California to incinerate pharmaceutical items at high heat. However, the state won't approve incineration sites because of concerns about pollution, so waste needs to be shipped to Maryland or Texas to be destroyed, a costly solution.