

Critics: LA County supervisors' delayed vote on drug take-back plan is win for big pharma

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By Susan Abram , Los Angeles Daily News

Heroin and needles. File

A vote on a proposal to require the pharmaceutical industry to fund what would be the nation's largest drug and needle disposal program across Los Angeles County stalled once again Tuesday after the [Board of Supervisors](#) delivered a mixed vote.

The proposed ordinance was introduced last year and its intention is to give Los Angeles County residents a convenient way to dispose unwanted needles and medications from the pharmacies from where they bought them. Supporters say it would deter residents from flushing drugs down toilets or throw sharp objects into the garbage where those who sort through debris would hurt themselves. In addition, it could cut down on opioid drug abuse.

But an [amended version of the ordinance](#) presented Tuesday appeared vague and too many questions remained, said Supervisor Sheila Kuehl. She and Hilda Solis, who noted she was enthusiastic about such a program and still could be, abstained from voting.



Instead, three of the five board members agreed to allow the drug makers to start a public education and outreach campaign as well as extend funding to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to hold additional drug take-back programs. The program would be reevaluated when the board takes up the issue again in November.

Of the nearly 40 county residents who addressed the board during the meeting, most were in support, including City Councilman Paul Koretz, who called the proposal groundbreaking and personal.

"I'm a diabetic. I use multiple needles to check my blood," he said. "As a public official it's embarrassing to me to admit I never knew what to do with all those needles. I would store them in containers and kept them in my garage."

Koretz said he planned to introduce a similar proposal at today's L.A. City Council meeting.

The pharmaceutical industry and makers of needles and sharps have said such an ordinance would be costly and too difficult to implement and maintain. The industry fought against a similar ordinance passed in Alameda County several years ago. Drug companies sued, but a U.S. Supreme Court decision last year allowed the ordinance to stand.

The board's decision was met with disappointment by members of the groups in support, including the National Action Stewardship Council, the California Association of Retired Americans, California Nurses Association, and Heal The Bay, Los Angeles among others.

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Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the National Action Stewardship program, said Tuesdays' meeting was the fifth time the adoption of an ordinance was pending.

"It's basically big pharma winning," Sandborn said of the board's decision.

Priscilla VanderVeer, spokeswoman for the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, a national trade association, said an education program such as the one proposed by the drug industry makes more sense.

"Thanks to the leadership of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, a broad coalition is coming together to teach, promote and enable proper medication disposal in L.A. County," she said in a statement. "As part of this effort, five leading over-the-counter, pharmaceutical, and medical device industry organizations have pledged to work with LA County officials to sponsor a public education campaign about the proper use and disposal of medicines."