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Toxic Waste Disposal Decision Postponed

The County Board of Supervisors decided unanimously Tuesday to wait at least 10 weeks before doing anything about a proposed hazardous materials law.

Businesses and institutions with more than 55 gallons or 500 pounds of a hazardous material would be required by the law to disclose their holdings with County health officials. That information would then be available to the public.

Two major concessions to users of dangerous substances have already been made by the committee, which spent six months drafting the proposed law.

Pesticides — given the elegant name of "economic poisons" in the law — were eliminated from the disclosure requirement in an attempt to ease the concerns of local farmers.

The booming semi-conductor industry received an even greater break through protection against disclosure of "trade secrets." Chip manufacturing plants resemble well-stocked chemistry labs in their supply of dangerous materials. Bits of silicon are dipped into exotic chemical formulae to make the chips. Firms have been known to literally steal to get their hands on the formulae used by competitors and some people in the electronics industry were concerned that full disclosure of the stuff in their labs would be used by the competition.

In order to prevent industrial theft of ideas, hazardous materials that are "trade secrets" would not be made public by the health department. Only public safety officials and physicians treating the victims of "trade secrets" would be allowed to know

what the stuff is.

And physicians who passed that information on would be subject to criminal prosecution, while companies failing to disclose hazardous materials under the law would only be subject to civil action.

After seeing a draft of the law Tuesday, the Supes decided to wait for an estimate of the cost of the ordinance and then hold a public hearing on June 7.

Supervisor E. Wayne Moore has already expressed his concern that the requirements would be an undue imposition on private business-people. And Dan Forbus came up with the imaginative objection that allowing the public to know might encourage theft of hazardous materials.

Similar hazardous materials have already been enacted by San Diego, Sacramento, Santa Monica, Del Mar, La Mesa, Roseville and Rockland. Yolo County has been temporarily stalled from following suit by successful lobbying efforts of the petrochemical biggies.

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