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TO THE EDITOR:

Cities and states are making strides to protect people from the potentially lethal dangers of coal tar sealants, but more work remains. These products contain high levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which can cause birth defects, learning disabilities, and even cancer.

A study by Baylor University and the U.S. Geological Survey found that living next to coal-tar-sealed pavement increases your cancer risk by 3,800%. The coal tar industry has claimed that its product is less carcinogenic than burnt food, but no evidence supports that.

You can absorb PAHs by touching coal-tar-sealed surfaces, ingesting dust that contains sealant particles, or breathing fumes while sealant is fresh. Children who play on coal-tar-sealed driveway or sidewalk surfaces are especially at risk of direct contact with PAHs.

PAHs are also released into our air and water as coal tar sealant naturally breaks down over time. Toxic to aquatic life, the chemicals can pervade the entire food chain and do lasting harm to our ecosystems. And the damage PAH-contaminated sediment inflicts on public water infrastructure can cost taxpayers millions.

Far safer alternatives, such as asphalt sealants, are readily available at a comparable price. Several large retailers have already stopped selling coal tar sealants. But without government action, we can't be sure that PAHs won't poison our homes, schools, places of worship, workplaces, and public parks. Last year, the American Medical Association called for legislation either to ban the use of pavement sealcoats containing PAHs or to mandate the use of sealcoat products with minimal PAH content.

Minnesota, Washington State and the District of Columbia have already enacted such bans. So have Milwaukee and Ann Arbor, MI, along with the Illinois communities of South Barrington, North Barrington, Winnetka, Highland Park, and Wilmette. The Chicago City Council is considering an ordinance to do so, O2017-3273, sponsored by Ald. John Arena (45th) and Ald. Scott Waguespack (32nd).

It appears that Illinois will fail to pass a statewide ban this year. But an amended House Bill 2958, introduced by Rep. Laura Fine, will allow all municipalities (not just those with home rule) to protect themselves against this harmful substance. It has attracted more than two dozen co-sponsors.

Tell your elected representatives to support a ban on coal tar sealants. And if you are planning to use pavement sealant yourself, be sure to avoid this hazardous variety.