

Fast track KIDS, not artificial TURF

GRASS IS GOOD! So what is the issue? The proposed Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) 2016 budget includes \$11 million over the next 6 years to put artificial turf fields at every high school (19) that does not currently have one. This is an expensive mistake. The total price tag will most certainly exceed \$23 million based upon today's cost for synthetic turf in Montgomery County, so more than half of the \$23 million would have to come from boosters, PTAs or commercial partnerships/rentals. What if that money cannot be raised? In terms of equity, only affluent athletic clubs will be able to afford the usage fees, which are currently three times more expensive than grass field rental.

Myth: MCPS staff has stated that every high school needs artificial turf because grass fields do not work.

Truth: No MCPS grass field has been installed on a comparable level with artificial turf, so there is no data by which to compare state-of-the-art grass fields, built for durability, high traffic and rain events, with synthetic turf fields.

A “sand-based” field with underground drainage (this is important to include) is the top-of-the-line grass athletic field and has 2 major advantages over standard grass fields (known as “native soil” fields, installed at the 19 schools) – **fewer rain outs and increased hours of use**, according to a report prepared by staff from Montgomery Parks Department, Montgomery County and MCPS, including James Song, Director of Facilities Management for MCPS.¹

Q: If sand-based fields are top-of-the-line, how many has MCPS tried?

A: None. Only the Soccerplex has a sand-based field, and they have only one.

Q: How does the sand-based field at Soccerplex perform?

A: Great! Soccerplex field has won “Field of the Year” and its fields have been used successfully during 6 inches of rain. Oh, and it wasn't just the sand-based field that did great. During the 6-inches of rain, native-soil fields were used too. <http://www.soccerwire.com/news/weathering-the-storms-how-md-soccerplex-stayed-open-last-weekend-amid-six-inches-of-rain/>

Q: What about MCPS' native-soil grass fields? How are they?

A: Some of them are great, but there is no concerted effort to design and maintain grass fields to the newest, best standards so that they can withstand rain and heavy use.

Q: Aren't conditions at Soccerplex different from the high schools?

A: Yes, somewhat, but the point is that properly built and properly maintained grass fields are able to withstand lots of use and rain. MCPS fields may have slightly different needs, but much is possible that has not been tried.

Q: Given that MCPS and the County Council have agreed that all future artificial turf fields will use plant-based infill rather than tire crumb infill, do we really need to have grass fields?

A: Yes! Grass is less expensive and better for users. Any artificial turf field contributes to the “heat island” effect and is an impervious surface. Artificial turf fields – any type – need maintenance, and the one public artificial turf field with a plant-based infill in Gaithersburg requires watering so that the infill does not dry out and fly away. Additionally, soil is a natural filter for toxins and pollutants. Exposure to natural grass, soil and plants also boost children's immunity.

Q: So what should we do?

A: Wait before installing any additional artificial turf fields. Instead, fast track a pilot program for one or more state-of-the-art grass fields, such as sand-based with underground drainage, designed by experts with experience in building and maintaining the fields to withstand rain and heavy use.

¹ http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/COUNCIL/Workgroups/ATworkgroup/AT_workgroup.html, pg. 27

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General information

Q: What is an artificial turf athletic field?

A: It is generally a surface of synthetic fibers made to look like natural grass - a plastic carpet - with an "infill" spread over the plastic carpet to provide cushioning and keep the synthetic grass blades erect. Cushioning is needed because the carpet is laid over a bed of rocks as part of the stormwater and drainage system required.

Q: What is tire crumb infill?

A: Tire crumb infill is made from thousands of ground-up tires. Tires were never intended to be ground up and used for our kid's fields and playgrounds. We know they contain a "witch's brew" of neuro- and reproductive toxins and carcinogens – some are known, such as carbon black, but others remain unknown because they have not been tested and because the formula for every type of tire is proprietary. Worse, these toxins have never been tested in combination, except as experienced by our kid's. Each field needs 40,000 to 60,000 shredded tires. "*Not surprisingly, the shredded tires contain a veritable witch's brew of toxic substances. It seems irresponsible to market a hazardous waste as a consumer product,*" Gaboury Benoit, Ph.D., Yale Professor of Environmental Chemistry and Engineering.

Q: What about heat?

A: Artificial turf fields get extraordinarily hot – much hotter than grass fields or even asphalt. The intensity of heat was noted during the Women's World Cup, which was played on artificial turf with tire-crumbs infill. The air temperature was 73 degrees and the temperature on the fields was over 120 degrees. Closer to home, the Blair High School synthetic turf field measured 167 degrees F on a day when ambient air temperature reached 92 degrees F.

Q: Do Montgomery County fields use tire crumb infill?

A: Yes. All of the existing publicly owned artificial turf fields in Montgomery County, with the exception of the Lakelands field in Gaithersburg, have tire crumb infill.

Q: What about "alternative" infills?

A: Montgomery County, including MCPS, has committed to using alternative plant-based infills for future fields. Plant-based infills are better than tire crumb infill but the "carpet" is still plastic, and the fields still get much hotter than grass fields. Grass is the best solution for our children and their planet. Synthetic turf fields with tire crumb infill should be converted to plant-based infill. Warning signs for player precautions should be used until the conversion is complete.

Q: Aren't most of the MCPS grass fields in poor – or worse – shape?

A: That's true! And it's true because NONE of the grass fields have been designed appropriately to withstand rain and heavy use. And many of the fields are lacking proper maintenance. Until this is corrected, replacing existing fields with artificial turf is a costly solution that is not needed to meet athletic program goals.

Q: Aren't artificial turf fields expensive?

A: Yes! They generally cost more than \$1 million and have to be replaced every 6-8 years at another \$500,000. Sand-based grass fields NEVER need replacing- they just need regular maintenance like their artificial turf counterparts, but without the health and environmental risks. For example, the **Wooton High School field final cost was \$1,305,178.**

Q: Grass fields have to be mowed, watered and maintained. Doesn't that cost money?

A: Yes, of course it does. But if done correctly, grass fields withstand high use and they're durable at a reasonable cost without overuse of pesticides or water. **That is why Montgomery County needs a pilot project designed and implemented by people who have experience producing and maintaining successful state-of-the-art grass fields. Otherwise every artificial turf field will consume three times more money per field than a high-end grass field. Well-built grass fields can meet our needs.**