

A Change of Mind—but not Heart—on NewTurf

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I have publicly stated my support for natural grass playing fields at NSHS. That remains my personal preference; however, after being contacted by many constituents who support the installation of NewTurf, I felt it necessary to reconsider my position. I decided to explore the subject of grass vs. synthetic surfaces for playing fields independently, rather than rely on information provided by the city. What I discovered was frankly, a mixed bag. There is precious little real research comparing the two and there are now many types of synthetic fields on the market. There is also an entirely new generation of improved synthetic turf surfaces that bear almost no resemblance to their earlier cousins.

After perusing several dozen articles, I located two, including a recent, initial report from a Pennsylvania State University longitudinal study that I consider well conceptualized, and balanced. Not surprisingly, the issues raised by opponents of synthetic surfaces are identical regardless of the source, and proponent's responses tend to be pretty uniform as well.

Generally, the information suggests that while synthetic fields are costlier to install, the maintenance costs associated with grass fields make them more expensive over time. This finding is subject to a caveat however, as "turf grass maintenance costs vary not only due to different climatic regions, but also due to the difference between expectations and resources... [in different venues]" ("Natural turf or synthetic turf: The numbers game", A.J.Powell, University of Kentucky) In other words, where there is little concern for the quality of the playing fields and little is spent on maintenance, natural grass fields are obviously less expensive than synthetic ones. However, upkeep resulting in the kind of thick, lush, level grass most of us envision when we think "grass field", is expensive and ultimately winds up being more expensive than synthetic turf.

The level of injury rates is about equal on natural grass playing fields compared to synthetic, but types of injuries may vary with the surface. As an example, there are more head and neural trauma, and ligament injuries on natural grass fields, more muscle trauma, sprains and twisted limb injuries on synthetic surfaces.

Where environmental safety is concerned, an advanced nanotechnology pioneered by a Danish company eliminates the rubber crumb infill odor, and reduces the content of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons that are harmful to groundwater if they leak. On the health front, microbial activity was found to be significantly less on synthetic as opposed to natural grass fields, but no staphylococcus bacteria of a type often causing infections in athletes, was found on either. Apparently, "staph" bacteria tend to be relegated to locker rooms!

The problem of heat retention remains for some kinds of synthetic surfaces, although the temperature on newer infill synthetic fields does not exceed that of the old Astroturf fields in use since the 1960's. Watering will cool these infill fields when they are in use during hot weather, and water needed for this function is less than the amount required to keep grass fields irrigated.

All things being equal, sound arguments in favor can be made on both sides, and that includes cost over time. Some things, however, are not equal and those variables make the difference and point the way toward natural or synthetic turf. Two articles presented a comparison of conditions that favor grass versus those that favor synthetic fields. The topography and drainage issues at South apparently make a synthetic surface more desirable. In addition, as widely acknowledged, there are significant advantages for synthetic surfaces where playability is concerned.

After learning more about these two types of sports surfaces than I ever wanted to know, I have to conclude that a good, well-installed, synthetic turf surface is seemingly the best choice for NSHS. Given that, and the fact that no Community Preservation Committee funds will be used, as well as the strong preference for NewTurf voiced by so many of my constituents, I am prepared to put my continued preference for grass fields aside, and support the NewTurf proposal. Since I had made my original preference public, I considered it important to share how and why I arrived at my current thinking.