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Delay on turf decision provides opportunity for analysis

By Guest column/Kevin Dutt and Brooke K. Lipsitt

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Newton -

The Board of Aldermen has yet to act on Mayor Cohen's request for funds to install synthetic turf at Newton South High School and, at this point, seems unlikely to act before fall. We hope that members of the Programs & Services Committee, to whom this item has been assigned, will take advantage of the summer to initiate a comprehensive assessment of synthetic versus natural turf options to ensure a sustainable solution for the NSHS fields — one which will address economic, environmental and community concerns.

The economic analysis should include a life cycle assessment of all costs that will be incurred with each option. We recommend analysis over a period of 50 years, in order to take fully into account the need for replacement or restoration of the fields. This must include not only the initial costs, but also the maintenance, drainage and replacement costs of each option. It should also clearly identify areas where projected costs may vary widely or have great uncertainty. Even if the financial analysis shows no difference over the period of study, both options have environmental — ecological, health and safety — impacts that must be closely examined. Examination of these issues should include both site-specific and neighborhood impacts.

The community needs to know whether the challenges presented by the geology and hydrology at this site, a filled wetland, are being fully taken into account. There is a long history of problems relating to surface water management with the current grass fields. Any successful new site design must include a comprehensive drainage plan to provide for well-drained fields and also ensure that stormwater can and will be controlled on site so as not to burden city storm sewers and to ameliorate or, at least, have no negative effect on adjacent properties.

For users, we need to know the facts, not just the rumors, about the level and type of injury associated with each surface and whether or not there exists a legitimate hazard related to inhaling particulates from artificial turf. We must also be sure that synthetic turf will not leach contaminants into soils and groundwater. These concerns must be weighed carefully against health issues related to the use of pesticides and fertilizers if needed to maintain natural fields. We must know whether and the extent to which there may be significant heat island effects.

Finally, it is important to consider whether there are additional costs or benefits associated with installing synthetic turf on multiple fields covering several acres. A carefully prepared landscape plan for the fields should include provisions for maintenance access and may become a factor in the decision depending on the limits on layout due to distances between fields that are required. The city should review examples of multiple-field installations in other locations before making a final decision, learning from the experience and actual data collected by other communities that have installed synthetic turf. It is not immediately clear that this needs to be an all-or-none decision; it may be appropriate to have a combination of natural and synthetic turf fields.

We urge the mayor and Board of Aldermen to take this opportunity to gather and critically review all of the information on maintenance requirements, costs, performance, player injuries, microclimate, etc., that has been assembled, being careful to compare the relative site conditions in the process. The fact that synthetic turf is the current fashion does not mean that it is necessarily a superior or inferior choice for our particular application.

Newton deserves a smart, sustainable solution for its athletic fields just as it does for its buildings, and we urge the board to move deliberately and thoughtfully in your consideration of this item.

Kevin Dutt and Brooke K. Lipsitt are co-chairmen of the High Performance Building Coalition.

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