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# Public Health: Cheap things cost double

By Cathy Drinan

**Fri Nov 21, 2008, 01:15 AM EST**

Marshfield - While listening to WATD the other morning, I heard the Town of Cohasset was planning several acquisition and improvement projects. One of the projects caught my attention: the building of an athletic area with artificial turf. I am not sure if it is tracks or fields, or both, that are being planned. It doesn't matter. They both are potentially toxic, and I hope the townspeople will ask many questions before this project is approved.

Artificial turf is derived mainly from recycled rubber tires, chipped and broken down until they are the size of crumbs. Recycling is good, right? Yes, it is, but we still need to look at what we do with the recycled end product. Is it OK to eat it? Is it OK to breathe it? Is it OK to heat it up and run on it? Is it OK for rain to trickle down through it and join the surrounding groundwater?

During a recent conference in Connecticut, I heard a great talk by a toxicologist on this subject. The fact that a toxicologist is interested in the topic tells you something from the get-go. I won't give you his name at this time, as he reminded us that his research is still in progress.

When I heard this particular presentation, an interesting thing happened. A man in the audience wanted the speaker to return to a previous slide and explain in greater depth the effects of leachate from artificial turf on surrounding water quality. The speaker said he could not at that moment, as he was pressed for time, but would be happy to speak to the man afterward. The man with questions was visibly upset and quite insistent. He said he needed this information because people were building these artificial turf fields in Massachusetts without paying attention to the proximity of water bodies and sensitive habitats, as they would with other projects, such as septic systems.

Again, the speaker declined and moved on with his presentation. At that point, the desperate man from Massachusetts did a desperate thing. He took out his digital camera, slunk down in his chair and began to take pictures of the speaker's slides! I was reminded of the Seinfeld episode where Jerry and Kramer are making bootleg movies with videos shot at the theater.

What was this man thinking? He wasn't thinking, really. He was feeling desperate and went into survival mode.

There's no need for that, though, as there's a ton of research is being done on this topic and there's enough reason to hold off on the building of artificial turfs until we get reliable answers on how to mitigate the problems.

The studies on synthetic turf involve hard-core chemistry. I wish Joanna, my chemistry major, was here to help me decipher "polyaromatic hydrocarbons, ethylbenzene, lead, chromium, phthalates, alkylated benzenes in gaseous form," to name just a few of the COPCs, aka chemicals of potential concern, in connection with artificial turf. It is not only chemicals that leach out. The black rubber heats up, increasing burns and dermal abrasions. Then there's the particulate matter kicked up by active feet, entering the air and being breathed in by young lungs.

As we continue to create a more artificial world, as we become dependent on the manufactured environment, we head into the darkness of the unknown and we risk losing our way back home. Take San Francisco, for instance. When I think of that place, I picture health and wealth, invigorating air and educated people. Some citizens there are currently concerned that their synthetic surfaces are getting out of hand. Synthetic turfs are in place for athletic fields where the leachate's heavy metal concentrations are above the drinking water standards. Yet, they are allowed to enter the groundwater because it is "only" being used to irrigate the Golden Gate Park and the zoo. Plans are in place to convert groundwater to potable water. Others are thinking that it makes sense to collect the water underneath the artificial turf and send it to a treatment plant.

Are we coming up with wrong solutions for wrong situations? Newton and San Francisco are just two of the many places with heated discussions from which Cohasset can benefit. Newton's blog on the topic gave me the line, "Cheap things cost double." Isn't it true?

What will artificial turfs cost us in the long run? I don't know, but I'm guessing that little towns will actually benefit, for a change, from not having the cash to consider such extravagant purchases. Good old grass and dirt are looking mighty good.

Try looking at [www.SynTurf.org](http://www.SynTurf.org) for a collection of related topics.

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