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For The Almanac

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Mt. Lebanon invites experts to talk turf

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More than 30 Mt. Lebanon residents attended June 12 meeting in which a panel discussed the improvements to the fields at the municipality's Main Park. On hand for the discussion were Mt. Lebanon Commissioner John Bendel, Recreation Director David Donnellan, Dan Deiseroth of Gateway Engineers, James Sauer of JT Sauer and Associates and Dr. Andrew McNitt, a professor of soil sciences at Penn State University.

In November 2013, commissioners approved a conceptual plan for a \$1 million field turf project at the park's Middle and Wildcat fields. About \$750,000 of the \$1 million would come from the municipality's unassigned fund balance, so no tax increase would be required. The other \$250,000 would be raised from private donations.

Residents have voiced concerns for months over having an artificial turf surface instead of a natural grass surface, citing cost and chemicals in the turf. Bendel said the board's preference is that organic infill is used in the field turf.

Residents were not given a chance to speak at the meeting, but were afforded the opportunity to ask questions via writing them on a card that was later read at the end of the evening.

Bendel said the field project came about because of "decade-long need to address the shortage of field space." Need has steadily increased over the years, and now about 3,600 youth participate in recreational sports in Mt. Lebanon. Field sports like lacrosse are rapidly gaining popularity.

Bendel also touched on how much the field would cost to maintain, stating that maintenance would be reduced by \$6,700 per year. Right now it takes about \$21,000 per year to maintain the fields. He mentioned the field would have to be replaced in eight years at a cost of about \$600,000. Bendel said fees gained from field usage as well as sign sales could be used to offset the cost with the remaining coming from Mt. Lebanon's unassigned fund balance. The cost to rent the field would be \$15 per hour.

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The municipality has about 40 years of experience with artificial turf, Bendel said, referring to the high school's field. He said artificial turf would increase the available usage of the field by 60 percent because the surface will remain playable for longer seasons.

"During my time here, it's been clear to me that an artificially turfed surface was the goal of the sports groups," Donnellan said.

He said in meetings with Mt. Lebanon's Sports Advisory Board, artificial turf was "identified as high priority importance." He added that the sports advisory board unanimously supports artificial turf at Middle and Wildcat fields.

Mt. Lebanon has already advertised for bids for the project and expects the bids to be in by June 19. The targeted start date for the project is Aug. 1 with completion by the end of October, Deiseroth said.

Deiseroth addressed concerns that residents had about potential flooding in the area of the fields. He said the fields are not in a designated FEMA floodplain. He said historically, flooding has occurred at Dixon Field in the park, but not on Wildcat or Middle.

"I will acknowledge it is in a valley, but there is no flooding in the area of the proposed artificial turf," he said.

He added a storm water management system will be installed under the field.

McNitt, who is also a former advisor to NFL groundskeepers, talked about some of the pros and cons of artificial turf.

"They both have their place," McNitt said, adding that he is not a consultant, "I was simply asked to come speak to you tonight."

He said that natural turf can get muddy and only take one event before it needs to be groomed. He said research shows that most high school fields need to be renovated after 80 events per year. He said with artificial turf fields, the negatives are the cost, injury potential, heat and chemicals used in the turf.

McNitt said he understands residents' concerns because there's not a lot of open space in Mt. Lebanon.

"It feels weird to carpet it," he said.

He added that with artificial turf, the crumb rubber or other type of infill needs to be replaced or "top dressed" on a regular basis. He said between 6,000 and 7,000 pounds of crumb rubber can come out of a field each year. With organic infill, some type of shock absorption pad would need to be used, which can run about \$50,000.

He said while both types of surfaces can become hard, a natural surface may be harder at the end of the year if it has not been properly watered.

While McNitt is not a toxicologist, but a soil scientist, he said there are chemicals in artificial turf. They include alcohols, acids, ketones, esters, lactones and sulfur among others.

He added, "You're not the first community to have these issues."

The meeting was recorded and is available for view online at www.mtlebanon.org (<http://www.mtlebanon.org>), and on Mt. Lebanon's cable channels 17 and 34.

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