

Letter to the OB Planning Board and to the Martha's Vineyard Commission

I'm writing to weigh in on the artificial turf vs natural grass playing field controversy. There's no question the high school needs a new track and my comments below in no way diminish the need for improved facilities for our athletes and children. However, the fact that the MVRHS and MVPS leadership are choosing to spend so much of their time, political capital and fundraising efforts on one field when we are in the midst of a pandemic is appalling.

As you may know, I have supported and worked to make the Island better for our young citizens for more than 20 years, endeavoring to get the YMCA built, supporting early childhood education and Community Services, Vineyard House, The Youth Task Force, Island Grown Schools, MV Youth etc. So I am well aware of the tremendous need, where we as an Island are falling short is in fostering healthy, strong children and where so many donors are trying to jump in and bridge these gaps.

As we have learned this year, now more than ever, there is huge need on the Island. Nearly 50% of the children received free lunches during the school shut down. The MVRHS and the Town of Tisbury need new and/or serious upgrades to their physical plants -- estimated at \$100 million and at least \$55 million (MV Times Saturday July 4, 2020) for each respective project. And the schools are all underfunded -- as we saw this spring, the schools have to make hard choices about what programs and teachers to cut.

So again, I ask, "Why does Matt D'Andrea, Ritchie Smith and the MVRHS School Committee Leadership choose to focus so much of their time on getting one plastic field installed when there is so much other critical need?"

And why does the school leadership insist on doing this all without a Master Plan for their campus? The cost of an artificial turf field needs to be put into the context of the school's other long overdue capital needs which the school administration has failed to develop a plan for. When I helped the YMCA develop their plans and as Community Services upgraded their properties, their Master Plans drove the entire projects. What if the MVRHS needs a new building and it needs to go where the proposed new track needs to go? How can they just say, "It won't." How can they be asking for 17 new bathrooms for a field house, when

the Town of Oak Bluffs is already at capacity? It's clear they have done no studies, no overall planning or thinking.

Moreover as someone who invests in youth, investing in one plastic field makes no economic sense.

OK, so the school is getting this \$11 million dollar Phase I part of their campus "donated". But is it really a gift when we are going to have to pay for the hefty maintenance fees (I don't care what Chris Huntress and others will tell you. Every town that has artificial turf and wants to stay within their contractual warranty spends at least \$15,000 a year per field). AND who is to say that the MVRHS and the MVYPS will take care of this field? Look at their buildings around the Island. There is so much deferred maintenance and neglect it is breathtaking. Then there are the replacement costs of artificial turf starting at \$500,000 and the disposal cost of around \$225,000 (Mr. Huntress's price, not mine). As of today no one in this country recycles artificial turf despite the fact Mr. Huntress has twice asserted that he has the recycling all lined up and the MV Times had to make just one phone call to find that this, in both instances, is not the case.

Staying with the economics for a moment more...If the school chose to put in a track with a grass field, it would be \$1 million dollars less (and they could use that \$1 million to upgrade ALL the fields on their campus -- even based on Mr. Huntress's astronomically high grass numbers. Real numbers on the Island have demonstrated by the Oak Bluffs School project, which was done for under \$200,000 and this included local labor, state of the art irrigation, a new non-potable well, and the purchase of a grass turf aerator. Additionally, the maintenance costs for the grass fields are about the same cost as for a plastic one and would never have to be replaced or disposed of.

The mention of disposal leads me to the other cost of plastic fields: the environmental cost -- both to our physical environment and developing bodies. Risking exposing children to harmful, cancer causing PFAS chemicals is unthinkable -- especially when we have another, time tested choice with natural grass. The industry denies the existence of PFAS in their carpets, but all legitimate testing has proven otherwise.

And then there is our Island, which I, like you, treasure for its clean water, trees, open space and biodiversity. Never have we as a community appreciated it more than this Spring when it offered us a refuge and a place to go when every other place - the movies, restaurants, etc. -- were not safe. Why would the MVRHS and MVPS leadership embrace plastic and risk harming the land in any way? Meanwhile, the teachers in their schools are educating their students about the effects of plastic on climate change. Island children worked tirelessly to get a single use plastic and soda bottle ban passed, a straw ban passed and there was a widespread community effort to ban plastic bags. So, how can they justify installing 2-acre artificial turf field, which is the equivalent of 46 million plastic straws and 3.2 million plastic bags. The direction they are going is profoundly disconnected from the direction of their student body and community.

I've read Elizabeth Durkee's, (Conservation Agent at the OB Conservation Commission) February 12, 2020 comprehensive letter outlining the negative environmental impacts of artificial turf playing fields. In her letter she expressed concern about the artificial turf breaking down putting microplastics into the groundwater. This track, fabricated out of toxic chemicals, is going to be constructed over a Zone II wellhead protection area. I want to add to those findings the results of a new study published in the June 25, 2020 New York Times article "You're Probably Inhaling Microplastics Right Now" which "found plentiful evidence of these tiny particles in dust in the nation's most remote places" "up to 6 percent of the dusts in those far-flung locations are microplastics". The study found that these inhaled plastics can cause pulmonary illnesses producing inflammation and lesions in lungs, and repeated exposure is suspected of leading to respiratory problems like asthma and cancer and inhaling microplastics may also increase exposure to other toxic substances. Again, why are educators adding to the problem rather than being part of a solution: installing grass fields that can serve as climate mitigation tools.

So in summary,

Why would we back a plan this part of no Master Plan, will be exorbitantly expensive for the taxpayer, will limit the ability for the school and taxpayers to deliver other critical needs to their students (including hiring great teachers, funding programs and curriculum development), is designed by a person who has not been completely straight with the community and has huge environmental downsides?

It just makes no sense. And I'm hoping you will have the good sense to turn this down and maybe this will inspire our school leadership to focus on what is important right now: educating the children in a safe, thoughtful way.