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Martha's Vineyard Commission

P.O. Box 1447

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Dear Martha's Vineyard Commission:

Three years ago I wrote you a letter expressing my feelings about creating an Athletic Complex at the high school that included a synthetic turf field inside a new track. For those of you who were on the commission 3 years ago and are still on the commission now my thoughts on this project are still very much the same. I have coached athletes of all ages for my whole life. I coached varsity lacrosse teams for 38 years, 21 of those years here on Martha's Vineyard. I was the first person to introduce lacrosse to the island when I moved here from Philadelphia 25 years ago. I also coached field hockey, girls' ice hockey and girls' soccer at our high school. I have had the opportunity to work with some amazing athletes, many who have gone on to play sports in college. No one is more passionate about sports than I am as a player, a Mom, a Grand Mom, a teacher and a coach. And no one cares more about our athletes here on the Vineyard than I do. As a coach I have always looked out for the health and well being of all the athletes that I have worked with.

For such a small high school the Vineyard has always produced great teams in many sports and always competed extremely well in whatever league we were in. And yes, many teams have gone to the state tournament. The success of our programs has been due to some amazing coaches who have guided some very talented Vineyard players throughout the years. Their success each year is not due to the fact that they practiced or played on expensive athletic facilities. They often had to adapt to the conditions of the fields and the weather. We have turned out some outstanding athletes here at the high school who have in no way been at a

disadvantage playing on our grass fields. I know our fields well having lined both the football field and the field hockey field, which lacrosse used as a practice field, for the 21 years that I coached girls' lacrosse. They have never been taken care of properly and maintained with the right equipment by someone who was a specialist in field management. They need help and this whole debate has brought this neglect to our attention. Of course we all feel that our athletes deserve the best and we want to be able to provide them with the best fields possible. But the real question is whether a synthetic field is the best for our athletes. Perhaps many people do not understand that synthetic fields are not the safest and healthiest surface for our athletes to play on.

Synthetic fields are especially hard on knees. I have been told this by players, coaches and umpires who play on them. Turf surfaces do not give with athletes as they plant their cleats or turf shoes running forward and then try to change direction. Young girls in particular have more torn ACLs practicing and playing on turf. This would be the same for all field athletes playing football, soccer, field hockey or lacrosse. There is also research out there showing an increase in the amount of concussions played on synthetic turf. Other common injuries for all ages playing on turf are turf burn which occurs when the players fall on the field. Those abrasions can easily get infected. Have you ever noticed NFL players with wide tape all along their arms? Many field players also get black toe caused by jamming one's toes as your cleats make a sudden stop on the turf to change direction. Then there is the real problem of the particles in the synthetic surface that often adhere to the players' cleats, socks, legs and can even be inhaled. Even if there is a small chance that these could cause cancer in one of our precious island kids why do we want to take a chance? In addition to all of this, I witnessed how hot a synthetic turf field can get when my daughter played in the NCAA championships at Lehigh University. The temperature on the field at game time was 100 degrees. Players had to be cooled down with buckets of cold water when they came off the field in order to prevent heat exhaustion. So we really need to ask ourselves is synthetic turf what is safest and healthiest for our players.

Besides being a coach, I am also part of an Environmental Educators group who have been working with all our island children teaching them how to take care of our fragile environment here on the Vineyard. We all cherish the natural beauty of the island and as educators we are helping our children to better understand our world and showing them how each one of us can make a difference. How wonderful it has been to see the students and their teachers at the West Tisbury

School and the Charter School create Plastic Free MV and speak out of the dangers of plastic? They are passionate about their message and we need to listen to them! We live on an island not on the mainland. Decisions we make now will affect further generations. We need to pay attention to the need for clean water, develop a healthy, safe environment, consider traffic issues, noise and light pollution issues and do what we can in order to protect our fragile ecosystem. These environmental concerns will affect all of us who live here. In my role as Youth Education Director for 12 years at The Polly Hill Arboretum I worked with hundreds of island children teaching them the importance of plants, flowers and trees that provide us with the clean air we breathe. So, I am a Green person who deeply cares about the future of our environment that we are passing on to our children and grandchildren. We need to find out if the plastic field can leach into our water table. We all drink that water and the high school fields sit right on top of the main aquifer of our island. Does that run off drain into our local ponds? And where does that plastic carpet go when it needs to be torn up and replaced every 7-10 years? Aren't we trying to get rid of plastic on our island?

As much as I love working with athletes I also value the importance of a good education. Not every student at the high school is an athlete. We have lots of talented artists, musicians, writers and scientists at our high school many who do not participate in athletics aside from gym class. They deserve the very best too. Our high school right now needs some serious attention, so why is building a state of the art athletic complex at the top of the list? We need to look at the bigger picture in order to provide the best possible education for all our high school students.

Lastly, as far as the Regional impact of having a big athletic complex at the high school that can be used by our entire community, we have to think about the implications of such a complex. Then the fields would be overused by adult teams and youth teams as well as our high school athletes. I feel that the high school fields are for our high school athletes and perhaps the middle school teams that will feed into the high school programs in season. Do we really want outside groups not sponsored by the high school playing on those fields at night when there is no security? The youth teams especially under 12 are much better off practicing and playing at their local elementary school fields where parents and siblings can be on the sidelines cheering them on. These fields have been greatly improved by the Field Fund group. They have purchased the proper equipment and had the experts show them how to create the best possible grass fields for our

young kids to play on. We can have great grass fields at the high school with the proper equipment and a dedicated, trained field maintenance person who can seed, roll, aerate, cut and line all our playing fields and oversee them all year long.

Certainly there are excellent landscapers, golf course experts and horticulturalists on our island who could offer us advice and help us find the right person to get the job done correctly. Maybe even a student coming out of our highly successful horticulture program would come back after college and dedicate himself or herself to maintaining those grass fields that he or she once played on. Then we would realize that we provided all our athletes with what is best and safest for them and what they truly deserve.

Please understand that I share these thoughts with you because I care so much about what is best for our kids and our island!

Sincerely,

Betsy Dripps