

Dear MV Commissioners and Members of the Oak Bluffs Planning Board,

The MV Environmental Educators Alliance would like to express its concern about the proposed renovation of the MVRHS playing fields. As the group of teachers that work regularly with students, fostering their love and understanding of our unique Island environment, we are deeply disappointed by the inclusion of artificial turf in the renovation plan.

We appreciate and share the desire to provide the best for student athletes. Hopefully it is the mark of every great teacher and coach that we strive and fight to give the world to our students. But we do not see how a plan calling for the use of artificial turf, could be defended as such.

We live on an island -- the geologic definition of limited space. Our resources are uncommonly finite, and uncommonly cherished. Our goal, as environmental educators, is to expose the different layers of the world around us, to open student's eyes and ears to this amazing place. We want to give them the language and share the passion, to know it well. We provide an opportunity for them to develop a deep sense of place and connection to their Island home, and hope that from this connection grows a strong inclination to care for their environment – here, or wherever life may take them.

As they grow into adults we hope these students will keep this love for the Island close in their hearts and let it weigh heavily on the decisions they face as future community leaders. Change is inevitable. But change of any particular sort is not. Just because there is arguably a “trend” to install artificial turf fields this community does not need to make that particular change. Alongside this trend is an equally powerful movement of communities who are fighting these artificial fields, or communities who at the very least, are placing temporary moratoriums, and waiting until more can be known about the health, economic prudence and safety of this sort of material. In the end it is often money that rules the day. Ironic and shortsighted, when looking many years down the road, artificial turf is a costly financial choice, not to mention health and environmental one.

Today, we increasingly partition our species into a space separate from nature, despite the biological certainty that we are a part of its tapestry. Frankly, we wish our profession as environmental educators was obsolete. It did not exist years ago, because it was not needed. Boiled down, we are essentially making sure students get outside and know their world. This used to go without saying, and was indistinguishable from being alive. Convenience, haste, development, digital advancement, and materialism, have all pushed us deeper into our buildings and concrete and in front of our screens. And now, increasingly often, communities are extending the built environment outside under children's playing feet. We are profoundly heartened that our community is engaging in a dialogue before rushing to this same conclusion.

It may not be as lush and diverse as a rainforest or even an oak woodland, but a playing field is grass and dirt and bugs and weather. Please let our kids maintain an awareness of rain and frozen ground and dirty elbows. We are in no way diminishing the need for improved facilities for our athletes. The value of

the debate surrounding this issue is that it has made it clear that our community is united and committed in its desire to put the effort into providing an athletic complex worthy of its athletes.

But let us model the sort of decision we hope these very same student athletes will make as future leaders. Let's keep our grass fields, but work together to make them exceptional. This would seem to address most of the concerns on both sides of this issue.

This conversation has also made it clear that one thing no one can question is the deep resources and knowledge we have available here in our local community. We undoubtedly have the ability to reconcile environmental, athletic and financial concerns in spectacular grass fields. This, more than any amount of plastic fields, will make us the place where other teams look forward to competing, and will allow our athletes and our community to excel on multiple fronts. We may run the risk of a few rain delays, but we will be rewarded with so much more.

Thank you to all involved in the thoughtful consideration and evolution of this process.

The Martha's Vineyard Environmental Educators Alliance