

# Letter regarding MVRHS application

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To: planningboard@oakbluffsma.gov <planningboard@oakbluffsma.gov>; Alex Elvin <elvin@mvcommission.org>; Lucy Morrison <morrison@mvcommission.org>;

 2 attachments

Rebekah Thomson letter to MVC and OBPB.pdf; ATT00001.htm;

To the Martha's Vineyard Commission and the Oak Bluffs Planning Board,

Please find my letter regarding the MVRHS application attached. I felt compelled to write because:

It is hard to understate the significance of the MVRHS proposal. It will represent an ongoing tax burden to all taxpayers at a time when the needs at the school have never been greater, pose direct risks to human and environmental health, and, as the game field of the island's regional high school, it also has tremendous symbolic importance. My hope is that you approve a space that will not only honor our athletes, but also speak to our larger humanity, island values, and relationship with the natural world.

Thank you,

Rebekah Thomson  
West Tisbury

May 3, 2021

To the Martha's Vineyard Commission and Oak Bluffs Planning Board,

I write as an environmentalist, a youth soccer coach, a former teacher, a former college athlete, a member of a number of island school, preschool and environmental Boards and organizations, and a founder of The Field Fund. I co-founded The Field Fund because I wanted to bring solutions -- not just criticisms -- for the challenges our community is facing. I didn't just want to talk about having our children have a connection with nature, I wanted to help facilitate that fundamental experience. But most of all, I write as a parent.

My husband and I made a choice to raise our children on Martha's Vineyard. The highly ranked public school system -- something my late mother, a former school committee member (2002-2010) and former chair of the MVRHS committee and all island school committee, proudly touted to lure us here -- was a huge selling point. I had also been influenced by Richard Louv's book, *Last Child Left in the Woods*, which highlighted the increasing divide between children and the outdoors. Those lessons weighed heavy in the calculation to relocate. We were drawn here by family and things that mattered and became invested in those things.

Fast forward, more than a decade later. We are grateful for the education our three children have received at the up island schools and the overwhelmingly positive athletic experiences they have had from youth soccer to tennis and basketball, and countless pickup games in between. But as we look ahead, we are concerned. Both the high school academics and the high school's building are in dire need of attention. Unlike 10 years ago, when the school ranked in the top third of the State, it has slid to the bottom third (although the school leadership seems to downplay that unfortunate truth, citing admittance into top universities by its top students as if that is the criteria). And the school building itself needs a massive overhaul, prompting the school to ask for a \$1.4M feasibility study in 2019 and apply for MSBA funding for six straight years. Why have the latest MVRHS applications been declined? The need is clear but the lack of alignment at the municipal level regarding the regional high school remains a roadblock.

As much as we love sports in our family, above all, we want the high school to be a thriving educational facility for all island children. As others have pointed out, the disproportionate focus on this sports complex, given the other challenges the school faces, feels deeply misguided. Had this same level of focus been placed on the core issues at the high school for the last five years -- earning buy-in from all six towns, projecting a vision for a truly inclusive regional high school, sorting out the regional funding formula -- I am confident we would be in a very different place. Instead, the school leadership chose to prioritize this project that divides and distracts the community from the larger task at hand.

As for the reasons the MVRHS is citing to justify their proposal, I hope it is clear to the MVC and the OBPB that there are real, workable solutions besides paving and plasticizing 2.5 acres of land.

- Lots of goose poop? Invest in some decoys or other deterrents. The Field Fund recently purchased an “Away with Geese” unit to use at the Oak Bluffs School fields. If that proves insufficient, we have identified some other products to try as well. In the case of the MVRHS, there will always be at least some grass fields there, so best to try to solve the issue at-hand.
- Nitrogen? Focus on regular soil testing, smarter soil amendment, and proper fertilizer application to ensure we don’t overuse nitrogen and that the nitrogen that is used does not run off.
- Rainouts? Commit to extra, deep tine aeration to ensure the soil doesn’t compact. Thankfully our sandy soils are naturally great sieves. Over almost 4 years, The Field Fund has never asked a partner school or town to close their field due to weather.
- Worried about using a lot of water to irrigate? Embrace a regenerative approach to landcare prioritizing organic soil content (which enables the soil to hold water) and invest in a new, efficient irrigation system and controller. The Field Fund did this at the Oak Bluffs School in 2018 and is installing the same system at the West Tisbury School this summer. It will make for a better playing surface, too.
- Worried about usage? By most standards, the number of fields compared to the MVRHS population is enviable. The false assertion that additional acres would have to be clearcut in order to accommodate even more fields if grass is mandated by the MVC is simply not true. The Field Fund has been investing in other fields around the island to help offset non-high school usage at MVRHS.
- What about costs? Grass is far less expensive to maintain than plastic fields when factoring in realistic maintenance and replacement carpet and infill costs. And grass doesn’t bring with it the elevated risk of contamination. The Field Fund has seen great results while using island subcontractors and without breaking the bank.

Many of us with younger athletes who care about their wellbeing and connection to the natural world may not be the loudest voices in the room (or even in the proverbial room at all). But we have seen plenty of grass fields working -- thanks to folks who were committed to their success -- at the island elementary schools, at Dennis Yarmouth, at field complexes where the Natick and Bridgewater soccer tournaments are hosted, etc. to know that it’s where our kids belong. Last week, our son played his first ever game on plastic turf in Fall River. Even in April, the kids noticed how hot the surface was, and had to adjust their play to avoid turf burn and unwanted contact with the surface. A few years back, I coached my daughter’s team at a Memorial Day weekend tournament off island. A team of older boys had to play one of their games on an extremely hot, plastic field and disliked it so much, they opted to play on grass the following day (a choice afforded to them because they had won). A number of current and former MVRHS athletes and coaches have privately admitted that they do NOT want a plastic field on the Vineyard, but the intense pressure coming from administrators, coaches, school committee members and parents -- something we have all witnessed -- has kept them from speaking out.

This may be the biggest cost of all. Forging ahead with a deeply controversial, costly project, when those it is intended to serve are voiceless to oppose it, is not what this island needs. We need to rally together to get our regional high school where it needs to be -- academically, structurally, and culturally.

While many at the MVRHS have gotten caught up in an industry backed marketing pitch, I hope your Boards recognize how essential your independent oversight is to getting things back on track. The public review process underway at the MVC and ultimately at the Oak Bluffs Planning Board (albeit severely limited due to the MVRHS' invocation of the Dover Amendment), highlights the importance of informed oversight, which is lacking at the municipal level across the nation and has allowed for the proliferation of these costly, permanent plastic field installations. Informed questioning has already brought to light fundamental flaws, such as inadequate wastewater planning, which resulted in a significant application modification early in the review process. The mis-oriented game field, the greenwashing by the plastic field industry regarding recycling, "Cradle to Cradle" certification, and plastic "grass" shedding, and the presence of various persistent contaminants present in every component of plastic fields are yet additional aspects of the application that due diligence and public testimony have thankfully brought to light. Questions have also exposed the lack of transparency regarding funding -- there are anonymous donors or no donors at all, depending on which forum that inquiry is made -- and how those same interests have brought us industry-funded scientists to downplay potential risks to our children and the island. It is that informed oversight, as well as the island's broad thirst for climate action and preservation of the natural environment, that give me hope.

Thank you for putting in the long hours to attend hearings, to read the entire written record, to do your own research, and to prepare for thoughtful deliberations. The island's need for thoughtful oversight is clear. I hope that at the end of the day, your two Boards will stand firm in your commitments to responsible development, climate action, fiscal responsibility and condition this ill-timed and ill-conceived application appropriately. Our youth will thank you for it.

*"Time in nature is not leisure time; it's an essential investment in our children's health (and also, by the way, in our own)."*

— Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*

Thank you,

Rebekah Thomson  
West Tisbury