

## Oak Bluffs Planning Board

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**Subject:** mvrhs field plan

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**From:** RICHARD BENNETT [mailto:rvbennett123@comcast.net]

**Sent:** Wednesday, March 04, 2020 10:05 AM

**To:** Oak Bluffs Planning Board; turner@mvcommission.org

**Subject:** mvrhs field plan

Dear Planning Board and Commission,

I'm writing in response to an email I received from Kris O'Brien promoting the high school's proposed master plan to upgrade their athletic fields and facilities.

I daresay no one on the island has had more exposure to athletic fields than I. As a top level soccer player, college coach and college level referee I have experienced natural grass and artificial turf in various conditions for more than fifty years. For more than ten years I was a full time referee, and in that capacity I officiated on college fields in every state in New England and virtually all the high school and town fields in the greater Boston area.

Artificial has two major advantages over natural grass: it holds up better in wet weather and it can sustain greater hours of usage. It has been a safe alternative for schools and towns lacking adequate space for their athletic programs.

I have followed the debate over the construction of an artificial surface field since it was first brought up by the [MV@Play](#) group several years ago, and I have become increasingly frustrated with the arguments presented by its proponents. It is clear that the high school administration is determined to push ahead with their proposal, using whatever flawed logic and factual errors they can to achieve their purpose, and rallying the school's athletes to their cause. To wit:

1. Proponents have claimed that an artificial surface is safer than grass. A well-maintained artificial surface is safer than a poorly maintained grass field, but it is not safer than a well-maintained grass surface and in some circumstances can be less safe. Artificial surfaces register much hotter on warm, sunny days - as much as 30-40 degrees hotter than the ambient temperature. Despite objections of the players, Canada was allowed to install artificial surfaces for the 2015 Women's World Cup. The result was numerous postings by players of burns on their feet caused by the excessively hot surfaces of the fields. FIFA (the governing body of international soccer) has since banned artificial turf from World Cup competitions. In the fall of 2018, Boston news organizations reported that members of the Framingham football team suffered burns to their hands doing push-ups on a similar surface. Last Memorial Day weekend, one of our boys travel soccer teams experienced a fate similar to the women's World Cup team when they played a match on a turf field at Bridgewater State College.
2. Proponents claim that the amount of usage on the high school fields requires a more durable artificial surface, and they have presented data indicating that under current use the fields average 700 hours per field per year. While Mr. Huntress has stated that a well-maintained grass field could sustain 680-800 hours of use, the figure presented by the high school would seem to merit that we consider artificial turf. Unfortunately, either from error or bias, the figures the administration submitted misrepresent the actual amount of usage, and the usage

formula used by the Huntress group compounds the error. After originally stating that teams use the fields 5 days per week, based on documentation by MV@Play, the high school has more recently claimed the use is 6 days per week. There are times in a season, when there are Saturday games, that a team will have 6 events in a week and there are times that some teams will practice on a Saturday when they don't have a game, but this usage is more than offset by away games and Saturdays when teams don't practice. Factoring in away games, in order to average 6 usages per week teams would have to be practicing or playing games every day of the week. Except for one pre-season weekend, I know of no team that does this. Using the more accurate figure of 5 uses per team per week reduces the total high school field usage from 950 to 800 per year. Furthermore, the administration has inflated the youth sport usage by inexplicably including Babe Ruth baseball on the multi-purpose fields when they play on the baseball fields. Assuming the rest of their analysis of youth sports is accurate, the total youth sport usage should come to 320 per year rather than the 400 listed in their document. Finally, the Huntress formula for hours of use per year is based on the high school standard of 2 1/2 hours per practice. This is fine when applied to high school usage, but it grossly inflates the youth sports use. Youth lacrosse, by far the heaviest user of the fields, hold practices and games that last only an hour. Even if all the other non-high school groups practice for two hours, the average use for all these groups comes to less than 1 1/2 hours per event. When one recalculates the annual usage of the fields based on these revised and more accurate figures, the current field use comes to slightly less than 500 hours per field per year.

3. Proponents claim that any artificial surface "will be fully recycled" (O'Brien) and that the backing contains no PFAs. As Mr. Huntress has already confirmed, no such recycling exists in the U.S. - the only company that recycles artificial surfaces is in Denmark and they have no plans to open a processing plant in the U.S. Mr Huntress also has letters from the companies he proposes for installing the artificial surface that confirm the backing being considered doesn't contain PFAs, but to date he hasn't refuted the study reported in The Intercept (Oct. 8, 2019) that has shown PFAs in the blades of the artificial grass.
4. Proponents claim that this project will not be a burden to taxpayers. One wonders how the high school can raise private funding for this project when they've already rejected a private funding proposal to rebuild the track with a natural grass infield. The argument at the time was that the school couldn't be bound to a 10-year commitment to grass, but installing an artificial surface is a comparable 10-year commitment. Had the high school accepted that proposal, poor Joe Schroeder and the track team would have the facility they deserve fully installed by now. Moreover, even if private funding can be found, there is no guarantee it will be available every 10 years for the \$500,000 necessary to replace an artificial field. The current proposal asks for \$1.25 million to install an artificial surface field and to upgrade one of the grass fields, with the remaining three multi-purpose fields to be upgraded in the future, begging the question of which teams will be practicing on these less safe fields while they await funding for Phase Two and Three. For that same \$1.25 million, the school could provide funding to upgrade all five of the multi-purpose fields. Finally, school officials have claimed that over time installing an artificial surface field will save money, citing the reduced maintenance required. While adequate annual maintenance of an artificial surface is less than grass (\$3,000 vs. \$30,000), when one factors in the cost of installing an artificial surface and replacing it every 10 years, grass fields are clearly more cost effective (\$1,030,000 vs. \$550,000 for the first 10 years; \$530,000 vs. \$300,000 for every 10 years thereafter).

Almost ten years ago, when Perry Ambulos was a member of the School Committee, MV United Youth Soccer began negotiating with the high school to lease undeveloped land behind the JV baseball field in order to install two soccer fields, one of which would have been an artificial surface. I

was among those who supported this project, believing it would allow our soccer program greater space and a secure facility for what has become the largest youth sports organization on the island. Having followed the debates since then - from [MV@Play](#) to the current MVRHS plan - I've tried to remain a neutral observer, but I've become increasingly dismayed with the school administration's fierce determination to install an artificial field regardless of contravening data.

Contrary to the administration's claim that "this project addresses concerns about the environment, safety, and even cost" (MV Times, Feb. 27, 2020), the school has stubbornly ignored the many legitimate questions posed by numerous members of the community. I appreciate the work done by Ewell Hopkins of the O.B. Planning Board in recognizing some of the defects in the school's proposal, and I hope the MV Commission will look at all arguments objectively when they examine the proposal.

My thanks to all who have taken the time to read this rather lengthy treatise.

Sincerely,  
Richard Bennett  
Chilmark, MA