

March 18, 2021

Dear MV Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed use of artificial turf at the MVRHS athletic complex.

To begin with I would like to share Robert Swan's words "The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it." This is both my least and most favorite quote for the same reason, because I feel it is poignantly true. It gives us power but also responsibility.

After helping our island adopt a plastic bag ban in all of its towns and watching island students launch a landmark campaign to ban plastic water and soda bottles, I am shocked and disheartened that we are considering converting 2.5 acres of grass and earth to plastic carpet that will require cyclical disposal and replacement.

We have heard the projections about more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050 and the studies that found microplastics in 94% of US drinking water samples and our aforementioned actions demonstrate our community concern.

Next to climate change, solving the plastic pollution crisis is the environmental issue of our time. As a result our business owners have already made, sometimes difficult, changes, invested in new systems and products and even turned away from particular sources of profit in an effort to break our habit with plastic. Why would we devalue these efforts, disregard these concerns and create a new plastic habit? One that creates at least 40,000 lbs of plastic waste in a single disposal.

It has been stated that we need not worry about the plastic in the field because it will be recycled. But one thing we learned in our community's previous efforts is that plastic is not a good candidate for recycling with roughly 8% getting recycled in this country. Industry is quick to promise recycling as a solution, so that we keep buying their products. But we have decades of examples of industry backed recycling projects that were shuttered quickly after inception. The markets are not there, the economics don't support it, and therefore the promises cannot be fulfilled.

We know there is a so called "mountain" of used artificial turf in Europe. We have seen photos of rolled turf discarded in wetlands and vacant lots and marooned in huge landfills in this country. We are told that this will all change and recycling will be available when this plastic carpet needs to be trucked away. But wouldn't prudent decision making be based on the track record of what has happened and the options that are currently available? Rather than hopes of a recycling savior that may or may not come to pass? One of the turf industries own members had this to say:

“We have seen many installers offering repurposing or reuse of materials as a solution, but this is just kicking the can down the road when, ultimately, the old turf becomes someone else's waste to deal with.” (Sports Lab)

Even tonight I am so struck by the videos and infographics we saw, displaying all the trucking, machinery, heating, water, and frankly the infrastructure of the recycling facilities themselves, that are necessitated to reprocess these products. And what we were seeing were aspirational best scenarios. It seems a stark contrast to me to think of the equivalent grass field system involving renewal by sun, earth, and rain.

This very planning body, while considering this plastic field proposal is also making significant investments of time and energy to figure out how to bring the island together to fight and prepare for climate change and mitigate our contribution to it through wiser, more efficient energy use and conservation of resources. Yet at the same time we consider this completely nonrenewable piece of infrastructure, for which great alternatives exist. The MVC has stated goals about sustainability, land protection, water resources and solid waste. How can we inspire individuals to make sustainable choices if we do not model that in our community planning? Approval of this project would seem inconsistent with the other policies and goals that the MVC is forwarding.

Finally, I want to speak as a parent of two kids who love Vineyard sports.

My kids are not yet high school age and have already attended two different island schools with plastic play surfaces. Their preschool's play surface has since been removed over health concerns, even though when installed it was considered totally safe. Similarly, the manufacturer of the play surface at their elementary school made lots of assurances about durability, heat, and safety, yet it has been plagued by these very problems. The applied sand coloration quickly faded – rubbed off on sneaker treads, but also on hands and feet and faces -- to expose the hot black surface. The solid surface failed, in a variety of places leaving crumbled pieces that the kids play with and bring home. Areas of the playground repeatedly have to be roped off until the surface is repaired. My kids have complained of headaches because it smells so badly. And finally, the justification for a surface such as this – how it had incredible shock absorption and would keep kids safer, also did not bear out. There was a spate of badly broken bones until the school developed new protocols.

I feel nervous raising this as it sounds like fingers pointed at the local leaders who made these decisions. But it is not. I love my kids' school and hold its leaders in the highest regard. Rather, the finger is pointed at the industries that press communities with the next “too good to be true” “must have” product and all the while our kids live the experiment.

I raise these examples because those conversations closely mirrored what we are hearing now.

Even the industry itself admits issues with past synthetic field iterations. On Brockfill's own website it acknowledges how “heat stress is a major safety issue with artificial turf.

Players have a higher risk of injury from dehydration not to mention a decrease in athletic performance.” It also sites multiple studies reporting “A much higher incidence of lower leg injuries on artificial turf.” Specifically a 27% increase in surface caused knee and ankle injuries and an almost 3 times higher incidence of PCL (knee ligament) tears. Which is why, they go on to say, “benchmarking natural grass is at the root of everything we do.”

Do we understand what materials remain part of this proposal whose safety we do not fully understand? We have heard, that at least for PFAS chemicals, we can’t currently, truly assess this. Testing measures and risk assessment are simply too new. I appreciate the effort to get us the latest, best options in plastic field technology, but that means we are using materials that are relative unknowns and may have consequences not yet realized. We do not know yet what we do not know. We risk using a product with layers of uncertainty whose stated goal is to perform as well as natural grass, when we can skip the risk and keep our grass fields.

In closing, circling back to Swan’s words.

“The greatest threat to the planet is the belief that someone else is going to save it.”

Are we going to respond to his implicit challenge? Here we sit tonight, on this tiny, beautiful island where we share our lives and we are presented with a choice and an opportunity. Will we prioritize protecting our planet while striving for athletic excellence? Because it is clear we can do both. Will we model for our students a decision that balances the needs for infrastructure improvements with the most critical needs of human and environmental wellbeing, as well as sound long term land use and financial planning. It is the sum of many decisions like this that make the difference.

Or will we risk our kids, risk our water, risk our finances, and let our community and our environment, be someone else’s responsibility.

Thank you, for your thoughtful consideration,

Samantha Look

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