

January 29, 2020

Dear Martha's Vineyard Commission,

In their current dilapidated state, the high school fields are unwelcoming and unsafe, and the impassioned debate surrounding the next step--a step that no doubt requires immediate action--makes sense: both artificial turf and grass fields have significant advantages and disadvantages in terms of health, safety and environmental impact. But while this controversy has been expensive in terms of legal fees and community time, it presents a tremendous opportunity for role-modeling to our children and taking a leadership role in critical environmental stewardship.

Artificial turf is a poster child for a linear economy, an economy that extracts resources and ultimately wastes them. Every ten years, artificial turf needs to be replaced. Yes, recycling this material is increasingly possible, and yes, artificial turf manufacturers are working to incorporate more and more eco-friendly components into their product. But replacement fields are manufactured with and from fossil fuels and, every year, their increasing production introduces billions of tons of non-biodegradable material into the world. While natural fields also require fossil fuels for their maintenance, the potential for carbon neutral and carbon negative solutions is vast and growing. In contrast, an expanding artificial turf industry, with new factories for both manufacturing and recycling, lacks this potential. If we carpet our high school fields with plastic, whether they incorporate toxic tire crumbs or more eco-friendly material, we will be contradicting student-driven and town initiatives to curb plastic waste, from straws to shopping bags. We will be complicit in crafting an unsustainable course, one that increases dependency on non-renewable resources and one that disproportionately burdens poor and minority communities. We will be messaging to our children that natural resources are infinite, that environmental negligence is a trivial matter.

In order to face mounting environmental challenges, more and more communities throughout the world are embracing the tenets of a circular economy, an economy in which little to nothing is wasted. The current turf conflict, perhaps combined with the challenges of a global pandemic, makes for a crucible moment on the island. Let's not unroll turf that will be the "envy" of other schools and communities; let's unroll a vision that will be an inspiration. Let's invest in safe fields as soon as possible, and let's do so while deepening our commitment to what will no doubt be the requirements of a robust and resilient future economy.

Such requirements include investment in school and town eco-management initiatives as well as the technology that is integral to their success. It includes teachers who are fluent in the languages of the 21st century--JavaScript, CSS, Python, HTML. It includes research and implementation of sustainable and non-toxic fertilization strategies for natural fields, documentation and facilitation of the carbon harvesting of natural fields, and installation and

monitoring of sensors that will minimize watering needs. It includes programs that explore sustainable innovations, preserve and enrich island biodiversity, and empower islanders to navigate the inevitable challenges of the coming decades.

Nothing blooms from artificial turf, but we can make this turf controversy into an extraordinary seedbed.

Sincerely,

Leigh Fairchild-Coppoletti  
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