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Grass-roots uprising

Health, environmental issues slow dash to build artificial playing fields

By Megan Woolhouse, Globe Staff | September 13, 2007

On a cloudless summer morning, Kurt Tramosch, a public health consultant from Wayland, looked out across acres of green, artificial-turf playing fields in Waltham.

Others might have seen a vista of potential play, a landscape made for fun. Not Tramosch.

"Some of us look at this and see a tire dump," he said.

Tramosch and a small group of allies have come together to oppose what some call progress - a growing wave of installations of artificial turf throughout the western suburbs. They are fighting the battle on blogs, before town officials, and even in the state Legislature, arguing that there are too many health and environmental questions surrounding fake grass. In some communities, they have taken local officials to court.

The ringleaders don't have any formal name for their group, an unlikely conglomeration of individuals from diverse backgrounds who didn't know one another before debate on artificial turf erupted. One is a lawyer of Iranian descent who holds a PhD in international relations. A second is an MIT-trained electrical engineer and grandfather of three. Another is an accountant. Yet another is a public health consultant and cofounder of the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards. And they are unafraid to take on a very powerful force in local politics: sports boosters.

Their movement has met with some success. Town Meeting members in Wellesley, for example, voted against installing artificial-turf fields there last spring, saying they had too many questions about the project.

But the opposition has bewildered sports boosters and parents who have crusaded to install artificial turf on the fields where their children play. And in some cases, the debate has pitted parents, many of whom moved to the suburbs for the schools, against environmentalists and longtime town residents.

Ted Tye, a Newton parent who spearheaded a \$4.5-million effort to install artificial turf in Newton, called the need for the fields "a crisis," as the city closes Newton North High School's playing fields for construction of a new high school. He said artificial turf opponents are whipping up controversy where there should be none.

"Why have colleges and universities gotten behind it? Why has Harvard done it and the [state] Department of Conservation and Recreation?" he asked. "We need this and we need it now."

Advocates such as Tye say the new surfaces are not only safe, they are necessary. There are not enough fields to accommodate all the youth and adult sports teams, and there are so many games that grass fields are worn out, they say. They add that wear and tear has left many fields

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Turf wars

Four local men (below) are among those working to stop construction of artificial playing fields, like the one installed last year (above) at Tyngsborough High School. Top, two of the men, Tom Sciacca (left) and Guive Mirfendereski, measure the surface temperature at Veterans Memorial Athletic Complex in Waltham.

TOM SCIACCA, 61

WAYLAND

Background: MIT, electrical engineering, former Wayland conservation commissioner

Artificial turf fields "get very hot. I measured one in Sudbury that was 156 degrees. How can kids play on it?"

KURT TRAMOSCH, 60

WAYLAND

Background: Cornell University, Boston University School of Public Health, cofounder of Massachusetts Association of Health Boards, Mass Toxics Network

"This technology has been married to the reuse and disposal of tens of thousands of tires. That's the flaw in the thinking about these fields."

GUIVE MIRFENDERESKI, 59

NEWTON

Background: Georgetown University, Boston College Law School, Tufts University doctorate in international relations

"Why are we building Wembley-style facilities for little kids?"

GEORGE FOORD, 61

NEWTON

covered with holes, patchy grass, and rocks that make playing dangerous. In some places, fields also routinely flood.

Artificial-turf fields drain readily, allowing games to continue even in rain, proponents note. And they don't need seeding or mowing. Nearly 100 have been installed in Greater Boston in recent years, according to Tye.

An uprising in Newton

At first, Guive Mirfendereski reserved criticism not for the turf itself, but for the way Newton officials planned to pay for it.

Mayor David Cohen had proposed using Community Preservation Act funding to pay for part of a \$4.5 million bill to install artificial turf on three playing fields at Newton South High School. Preservation Act money comes from a 1 percent surcharge on residential property tax bills, and is matched dollar-for-dollar by the state. Mirfendereski said it wasn't right to use public money to pay for new playing fields in a wealthy community like Newton.

"I got pretty ticked about it," he said. "Why are we building Wembley-style facilities for little kids?"

He filed a lawsuit against the mayor and the city, arguing that Newton could not use Community Preservation Act funds on land it hadn't acquired with Preservation Act money.

Mirfendereski said a judge dismissed his lawsuit last year because it was not filed by a group of more than 10 taxpayers.

Meanwhile, Cohen, Newton's mayor, dropped his plan to use Community Preservation Act money to pay for the project. Cohen's spokesman, Jeremy Solomon, said the mayor now wants to use city funds instead. With the construction of a new Newton North High School, the need for usable playing fields is even more urgent. The \$154 million estimated cost of the forthcoming Newton North includes money to install artificial turf.

"We wouldn't continue to push it . . . if we didn't feel it was an important project for the city," Solomon said.

But Mirfendereski was just getting started, filing another lawsuit with a group of taxpayers opposing a plan to install turf at a city park.

A graduate of Boston College law school who also holds a PhD in international relations from Tufts, he began to research artificial turf. He created a website, synturf.org, which offers all sorts of articles on such subjects as why artificial turf needs to be watered (to cool it down), whether it burns players' feet, and whether it can harbor harmful bacteria .

Mirfendereski wears a tie and a baseball hat, his wiry gray hair kept in a ponytail. He closely follows international soccer and grew up playing the sport on dirt fields in his native Iran, as well as in Switzerland and other countries, before attending Georgetown University on a soccer scholarship. He coached Newton Youth Soccer teams for six years. He said he doesn't understand why students can't share fields at practice and gain proficiency in a sport by scrimmaging. When it rains, he said, practice in the parking lot.

"It's ridiculous," he said. "Once you buy into the logic of high performance, low maintenance, you can't really deny anyone who comes in and says we want an artificial turf field. . . . There's this competition to have the best, and that's dangerous."

Publicity generated by Mirfendereski's efforts also drew interest from other people, like George Foord. A 61-year-old accountant, environmentalist, and one of the few men to sit on the board of the local League of Women Voters, Foord said he worried that artificial turf was too new and untested.

Background: University of Akron; master's from Northeastern University, accountant

"Just don't install the [artificial] fields until we get better information."

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Foord added, "Newton doesn't want to be bested by Wayland and Wellesley and our peer communities, and it's competitive as far as having certain things. Artificial turf is the hot product of the day."

Wayland alliances

The technology used to create fake grass fields is an engineering marvel. The grass carpet itself is usually made from polyethylene fibers and sewn into a base. The crushed tire granules are poured by the truckload onto the surface. The granular mixture is supposed to simulate soil. The effect is a bouncier playing surface that is more forgiving than old-style AstroTurf. Underneath the carpet sits a complex drainage system that percolates water through the "soil" and into pipes that stagger the flow of water back into storm-water drains.

That's exactly what bothered Tramosch in Wayland.

A former member of the town's Board of Health and a longtime environmentalist (he also cofounded the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards and the environmental activist group Mass Toxics Network), Tramosch said the plan to build an artificial-turf field near one of the town's largest water wells, in an area known as Happy Hollow, could cause problems. Some 40,000 ground tires are used to create a single soccer field, and tires are considered hazardous waste, he said.

"This technology has been married to the reuse and disposal of tens of thousands of tires," he said. "That's the flaw in the thinking about these fields."

A native of Akron, Ohio, Tramosch worked at a tire manufacturing plant and had concerns about hazardous chemicals in the rubber. Influenced by the opposition in Newton, he and several other Wayland residents hired a lawyer and filed suit against the town for trying to use \$300,000 in Community Preservation Act funds for the project. The suit is pending in Middlesex Superior Court.

However, last November, Wayland Town Meeting members voted 180-128 to install turf, and the field is in the final stages of construction.

Craig Foreman, head of the sports proponents group Wayland Boosters, called the vote a victory for turf advocates. He said Tramosch and other antiturf activists are simply obstructionists who "oppose everything." Foreman said the fact that local and state officials have cleared the Wayland project should have ended the debate.

Ed Colletta, spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, said the state has no long-term study of artificial turf planned and there is no regulation of the fields, other than to ensure that runoff doesn't end up in protected land.

"None of the data we've seen show that there's any issue at this point," Colletta said.

Tramosch and fellow turf opponent Tom Sciacca, a retired electrical engineer and former Wayland conservation commissioner, asked the Department of Environmental Protection to review the Wayland case. The town settled with the environmental protection department, agreeing to pay for a consultant to test runoff from the new playing field this year. The town will also be required to submit a list of chemicals used to repair and disinfect the artificial turf in the future.

Sciacca said he got involved in the turf battle because he thought the town was falling for an industry sales pitch. No one in government wants to study the environmental impact, he said, because if they find problems they would "look like idiots" for not addressing them sooner.

"There have been lots of personal attacks, that we're crazies and somehow have an ulterior motive," he said. "I don't really understand what our ulterior motive is supposed to be. We're very mainstream, longtime town activist kind of people."

They may be mainstream, but they share an unusual interest. Sciacca, Trampusch, Mirfendereski, and Foord often meet in their free time to do their own analysis of artificial turf fields across the state. During the summer, they measured the temperature at many synthetic fields. They fear it could release chemicals into the air or ground, something known as "outgassing."

At 11 a.m. on an August morning, for example, the fake grass at Veterans Memorial Field in Waltham measured 126 degrees.

Hotter than a patch of natural grass. Hotter than a nearby strip of concrete, too.

Coming to a field near you

Last spring, the Town of Wellesley came within five votes of the two-thirds majority necessary to approve a pair of artificial turf playing fields at an elementary school.

Look for a similar battle in Newton.

Last week, artificial turf opponents appeared at a meeting before the city's aldermen, who are considering approving the mayor's plan to fund new artificial turf fields at Newton South High School. They were vastly outnumbered at the meeting, as more than 200 high school students filled the aldermen's chambers, along with parents, coaches, and teachers. Mayor Cohen sat next to Tye and fellow advocate Ron Remy, who had formed a group called Newturf for Newton (newturf4newton.org) and gave a PowerPoint presentation on the benefits of fake grass.

According to Tye, Wellesley artificial turf proponents lost the vote because the sports groups in that community "didn't turn out the votes at that meeting." He also blamed opponents for "dirty fighting" and spreading myths about turf, including that it can harbor flesh-eating bacteria.

"A lot of what they put out is half-truths, and they've tried to create some misimpressions," Tye said.

While delays plague Newton's project, supporters said Sudbury, Weston, and less affluent communities like New Bedford and Lowell have installed fake grass fields.

Newton South High principal Brian Salzer spoke passionately about the need for artificial turf at his school. Many teams no longer play home games, he said, because the conditions of the fields are so wet, sea gulls often flock on them.

"I think the people who are trying to stop it are using what I would refer to as scare tactics to get people to question a project like this," he said.

Newton selectmen will probably vote on the issue this fall.

At the recent hearing in Newton, Mirfendereski said, he and other opponents were allowed only three minutes to speak, while supporters and the mayor were given unlimited time. And he said after the meeting that he has never made the claim that "flesh-eating bacteria" live in artificial turf, although he said he wouldn't rule out the possibility.

"It has absolutely no redeeming value whatsoever other than to keep some [athletic] clubs happy," he said of artificial-turf fields.

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