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5 Takeaways From

Our FieldTurf

Investigation

2016

\$150K

THE GIST

San Diego County's public schools funneled tens of millions of dollars to an artificial turf company that spent years installing a defective product, and then demanded schools pay more money for a sturdy replacement.



Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle

Serra High School's football team warms up on El Cajon Valley High School's FieldTurf field before a game.

By Ashly McGlone (<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/author/ashly-mcglone/>) | November 18, 2016

San Diego County's public schools funneled tens of millions of dollars to an artificial turf company that spent years installing a defective product, and then demanded schools pay more money for a sturdy replacement.

Here are five takeaways from my investigation into how FieldTurf USA handled its local field failures.

Taxpayers have been left holding the bag.

One way or another, public schools – and by extension, taxpayers – have paid the price for a private company’s defective product (<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/across-county-taxpayer-funded-turf-fields-falling-apart-just-years/>) as more than 20 artificial turf fields failed throughout the region in the last decade. Grass blades are fading, tearing out and shedding, creating bald spots only a couple years after installation.

When the turf fell apart prematurely, FieldTurf often asked customers to choose between another defective field (the free choice) or an upgraded, sturdier turf for thousands of dollars more. Some public agencies paid up, even though their first field was still under warranty. Others chose a free replacement, and the results showed.

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FieldTurf officials argue they're fulfilling their warranty if two defective fields for the price of one together cover the eight-year warranty period.

School districts elsewhere in the state and country have sued FieldTurf for failing to replace defective fields with a better one free of charge. They say FieldTurf kept selling schools bad turf after they knew it was defective, and after they sued a supplier over it.

Though public records show local schools endured the exact same tactics and paid the price, most local public officials have nothing but praise for the company.

FieldTurf kept schools in the dark.

FieldTurf sued its grass supplier TenCate in March 2011 for more than \$30 million, blaming it for the defective fields, which could not withstand the years of sunshine and athletic use promised.

FieldTurf settled the lawsuit in 2014 and obtained an unknown amount of money to help pay for replacements, but did not notify all affected customers about the problems and kept charging them for upgrades.

FieldTurf did tell San Diego Unified some fields needed replacing before staff noticed any trouble, and used a quality turf at all but two of the district's replacement fields.

FieldTurf's salesman used troubling tactics.

When schools sought warranty replacements for their defective fields, they got fewer apologies than “offers” and “opportunities” to spend more money to upgrade to better turf.

One salesman tried to require new business as a condition for providing a free field replacement. In Oceanside, he went even further in his quest for new business and offered a teacher money to help him “close the deal.” (<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/the-consummate-salesman/>)

San Diego Unified was not truthful about its FieldTurf experience.

Six San Diego Unified FieldTurf fields were replaced under warranty in recent years, but officials claimed they had experienced no field failures. They said the fields were replaced as a preventative measure, and they were adamant that none of the replacements came with more bad turf.

According to the district’s own records, neither of those claims is true (<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/despite-failures-san-diego-unified-just-cant-quit-fieldturf/>).

FieldTurf still has a lock on the region’s public school turf work.

Several public agencies – including San Diego Unified, the second largest school district in the state – have skipped the public bidding normally required by state law

(<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/turf-company-high-prices-defective-product-cornered-sd-market/>) for large public works projects. They argue FieldTurf's quality and warranty are so superior, they do not need to consider any other brands.

Some school boards declared FieldTurf the district standard turf at the same meeting they voted to pay thousands of dollars more to replace fields still under warranty.

Had local schools not used FieldTurf for all their turf jobs, they may not have been so negatively impacted by the defective product. They likely would have saved some serious money, too.

Read the Whole Series

Part I: Across the County, Taxpayer-Funded Turf Fields Are Falling Apart After Just a Few Years

(<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/across-county-taxpayer-funded-turf-fields-falling-apart-just-years/>)

Part II: The Consummate Salesman

(<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/the-consummate-salesman/>)

Part III: Despite Failures, San Diego Unified Just Can't Quit FieldTurf

(<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/despite-failures-san-diego-unified-just-cant-quit-fieldturf/>)

Part IV: How a Turf Company With High Prices and a Defective Product Cornered the SD Market

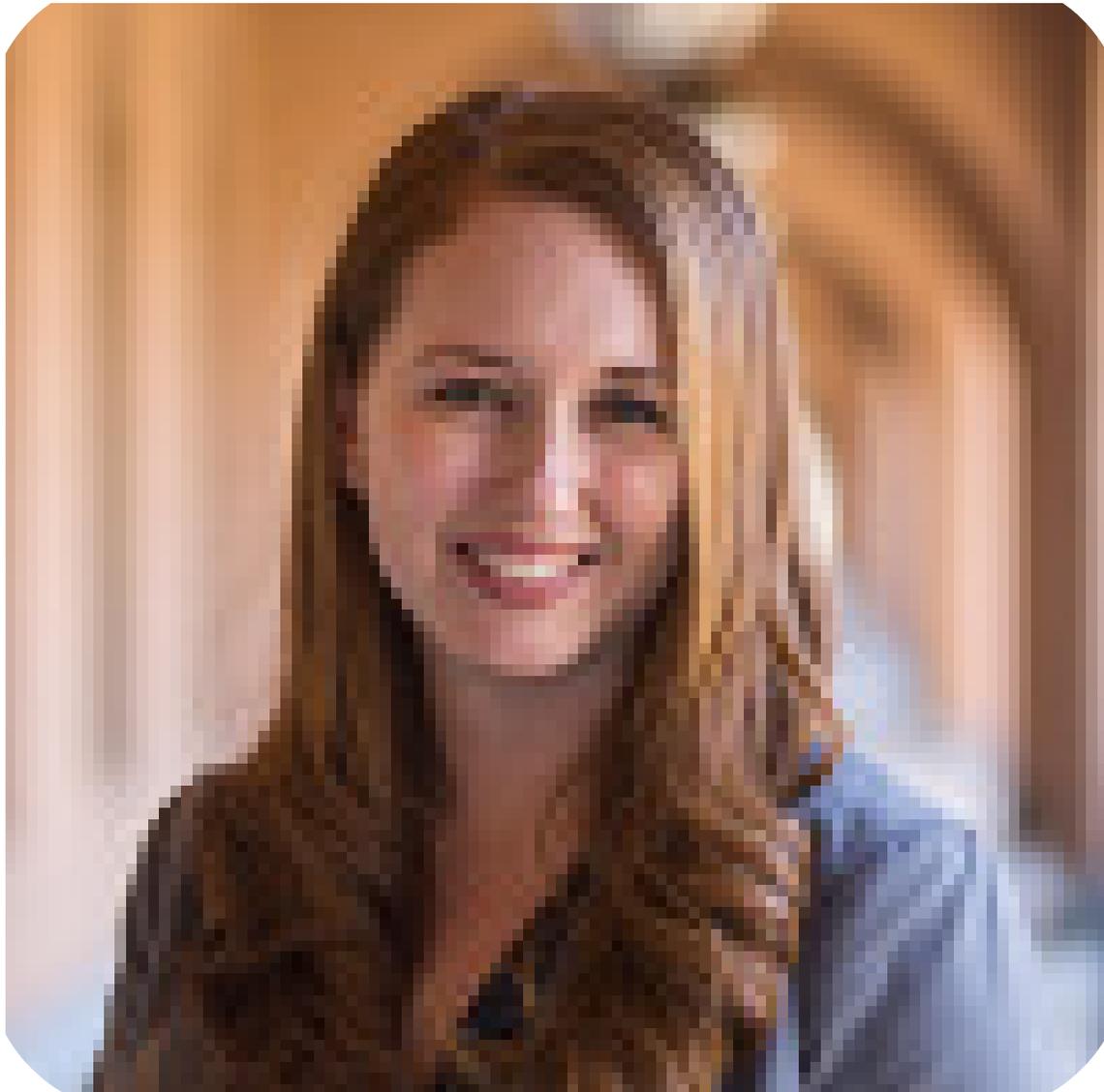
(<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/turf-company-high-prices-defective-product-cornered-sd-market/>)

Want to know how much your local school paid FieldTurf? This map shows all the FieldTurf fields and costs

(<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=106OHWn0zNz3cs0CRci2QJwu6tgY&ll=32.99929777234269%2C-117.13413550663222&z=10>) Voice of San Diego could document with public records provided by San Diego County's public schools and colleges. Some agencies said older field records had been destroyed, while others simply could not be located.

This article relates to: Education

(<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/category/topics/education/>), Must Reads (<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/category/must-reads/>), News (<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/category/topics/news/>), School Finances (<http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/category/all-narratives/school-finances/>)



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