

Dr. Jim Schleckser
10804 Riverwood Drive
Potomac, MD. 20854

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Letter in Opposition to Replacement of the Synthetic Turf Field at North Potomac
Community Center

To the Montgomery County Department of Recreation and Members of the Park and
Planning Commission:

My name is Dr. Jim Schleckser, and I am a long-time resident of Montgomery County and a regular user of the North Potomac Community Center. I am writing to express my strong opposition to any proposal to replace the existing synthetic turf field at the community center with a natural grass surface. I believe this decision would be a costly mistake that would hurt our community's health and wellbeing. I want to share some facts and figures that I hope will be considered carefully before any final decision is made.

The Cost Problem

Let's start with money, because the numbers are hard to ignore. Installing a new synthetic turf field costs anywhere from \$677,000 to over \$1 million, depending on the size and materials. Replacing an existing synthetic field — which is what we have — typically runs between \$5 and \$10 per square foot. For a standard community-sized field of roughly 50,000 square feet, that means a replacement cost of \$250,000 to \$500,000. That is not a one-time expense, either. Synthetic turf fields last about 8 to 10 years before they need to be replaced again, meaning this cost comes back around every decade. The rate of expenditure based on a 10 year life is \$25,000 to \$50,000 a year

Proponents of switching back to natural grass sometimes argue that grass is cheaper. But the real comparison requires looking at the full picture. A well-maintained natural grass field in our climate requires mowing, fertilizing, aerating, overseeding, irrigation, and drainage work. Annual maintenance costs for a properly kept grass field can run from \$42,000 to over \$200,000 depending on the level of maintenance applied. This is far higher than a synthetic field. And critically, grass fields in Montgomery County are routinely closed when it rains. That brings us to the most important point of all.

Our Fields Close When It Rains — And It Rains a Lot

Montgomery County closes natural grass athletic fields during and after rain events to prevent turf damage. This is a reasonable policy, but it has a real cost to our community. Montgomery County receives roughly 43 inches of rain per year, and experiences

precipitation on approximately 113 days annually. Looking specifically at spring (March through May) and fall (September through November) — the two peak seasons for youth and adult sports — the area sees an average of 4 to 6 rainy days per month. That works out to roughly 24 to 36 rainy days each spring and fall combined.

When we focus on weekends — the days when most community members, working families, and youth leagues use public fields — the numbers become very clear. Over the past five years, the North Potomac area has experienced approximately 12 to 16 rainy Saturdays and Sundays during spring and fall seasons each year. Over five years, that is somewhere between 60 and 80 rainy weekend days during peak sports seasons. On every single one of those days, a natural grass field would likely be closed. The synthetic turf field would be open.

That is not a small thing. Those are 60 to 80 weekend days over five years when youth soccer players, adult flag football leagues, lacrosse teams, and everyday families would have nowhere to play. That is thousands of hours of lost physical activity. And physical activity is not just recreation — it is medicine. Regular exercise reduces the risk of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, depression, and anxiety. When fields are not available, people do not automatically find something else to do. Research consistently shows that when access to recreational space is reduced, physical activity goes down. Closing a field for rain is not a neutral act. It has real public health consequences.

The Opposition Cancer Claims Don't Hold Up

Some people who support removing synthetic turf cite concerns about cancer risk. These concerns deserve to be taken seriously — and they have been. The good news is that the research, taken as a whole, does not support the idea that playing on synthetic turf causes cancer.

The concern mostly centers on crumb rubber infill — the tiny black pellets made from recycled tires that give synthetic fields their cushioning. Some studies have identified chemicals in crumb rubber, including certain polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), that are classified as potential carcinogens in high concentrations. A widely publicized report identified 306 chemicals in crumb rubber, with 52 of them appearing on EPA lists of potential carcinogens.

This sounds alarming — until you look more carefully at what the science actually says about risk. In 2016, the EPA, the CDC, and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry launched a major multi-year study specifically to answer this question. Their findings, along with those of the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA), did not find significant health risks to players, coaches, or spectators from crumb rubber exposure. One modeling study published in a peer-reviewed journal found that cancer risks for users of synthetic turf fields were actually comparable to or lower than the risks associated with playing on natural soil fields. The Dutch National Institute for Public Health and Environment, one of Europe's most respected public health

agencies, reached a similar conclusion, finding that health risks from rubber granules on sports fields were negligible.

The most frequently cited piece of evidence in favor of a cancer link came from a University of Washington soccer coach who compiled a list of players with cancer, noting a high proportion of goalkeepers. However, a follow-up statistical study by public health researchers in Washington State found that cancer rates among soccer players in that study were actually lower than would be expected in the general population. The connection, in other words, turned out to be a statistical coincidence, not a cause-and-effect relationship. The two formal epidemiological studies that have been conducted found no significant association between crumb rubber exposure and cancer. Researchers across the field consistently note that while chemicals are present in synthetic turf, the actual human exposure during normal play is very low, and no causal link to cancer has been established.

This does not mean we should ignore the science going forward. Ongoing research is appropriate, and newer infill materials such as the cork in fill being used on the NPCC field, offer alternatives if concerns persist. But the current evidence does not justify removing a field that serves our community every day nor the cancer claims from some of the supporters of grass fields.

What We Would Be Giving Up

The North Potomac Community Center synthetic turf field is more than a sports surface. It is community infrastructure. It serves children who play youth sports on weekends. It serves adults who use it for exercise and stress relief. It is available year-round, in the rain, after dark with lighting, and during periods when a grass field would be a muddy, unusable patch. Taking it away — or replacing it with grass — would directly reduce access to physical activity for thousands of residents who depend on it.

The costs of this proposal, both financial and in terms of community health, are significant. The evidence used to justify it is, at best, incomplete and disputed by major federal health agencies. I urge the County to reject any proposal to remove or replace the synthetic turf field at the North Potomac Community Center, and instead to direct resources toward maintaining and improving the field we already have.

Thank you for your time and your service to our community.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Jim Schleckser
Potomac, Maryland