

For Jill Castle
6th Floor

Montgomery County Sierra Club Testimony
Opposing funding of any Synthetic Turf in the MCPS CIP
February 10, 2026

Good afternoon, Council Members. I am Carrie Witkop, testifying on behalf of the Montgomery County Sierra Club and myself. As a mother of three MCPS graduates and former chair of the MCCPTA Health Committee, I have seen first hand how our decisions impact student well being. We strongly oppose funding for synthetic turf in the CIP and urge you to support the County Executive's position and the work of the MCPS Student Climate Action Council.

"Turf" is a misnomer. Real turf is living grass and soil. These synthetic fields are industrial carpets made of 20 tons of plastic and 200 tons of infill. They are hard, hot, toxic, and nearly impossible to dispose of. When these fields reach their end of life, they are not recycled; they are often dumped or incinerated, releasing toxins into our air and microplastics into our soil. Natural grass is environmentally healthy, safe, and many athletes say, more fun to play on. Would you rather skin your knee on natural grass or filthy turf?

Athlete's Health and Safety

Science tells us what the plastic companies won't. Synthetic surfaces cause far more ACL tears, concussions and heat related illnesses. On hot days these fields can be 20 to 50 degrees hotter than natural grass. In addition, the forever chemicals (PFAS) and microplastics found in these plastic fields are known endocrine disruptors. The NFL and Major League Soccer have documented the superior safety of natural grass. Students report that there is an unpleasant scent, feel and that the synthetic field is slippery when wet which makes playing tough. Is the supposed extra playing time on plastic worth the lifelong health risks to our children?

There is no question that we are risking the health of our children and environment for the benefit of the petro chemical industrial complex if we choose artificial fields.

Environmental Impact

I am here for the Sierra Club. We defend the environment. The runoff from these fields leaches toxins and microplastics directly into our streams and the Chesapeake Bay. A single synthetic field generates between 40 and 90 tons of CO2 during manufacturing and installation. In contrast, natural grass is a carbon sink that actually sequesters CO2. Montgomery County has ambitious climate goals. Natural grass can help us meet those targets.

(The new plastic grass infill uses about as much water as a natural grass field but you do have the microplastics runoff because of all the water use)

Several states (Vermont and Colorado) have officially banned the sale of synthetic turf due to the PFAS forever chemicals. By funding these fields the County is investing in a product that is becoming a legacy pollutant which could become a legal and financial responsibility for the county.

Expense

The economic argument for synthetic fields fails. A synthetic field costs between \$2.65 million to \$3.65 million to install. A high quality natural grass field, built with proper drainage costs about \$600,000 a quarter of the price. Maintenance costs are not much different if the plastic is taken care of the way that it is supposed to be. (Maintenance of grass costs between \$13,000 and \$40,000 per year ..synthetic costs between \$8,000 and \$49,000)

Equity and Maintenance

Montgomery County Public Schools need to have a policy which guarantees that every natural grass field is maintained and kept in good shape no matter where it is in the county. Natural grass can provide more playing time if built correctly. Grass is safer for athletes and our environment. As far as maintenance goes, there are experts across the county who can be consulted. The University of Maryland has a sports turfgrass facility nearby. The Soccer Plex has over 20 acres of natural grass sports fields and is willing to share their expertise. The county has golf course experts who can help and other resources are available.

Conclusion

To be clear, the Sierra Club 1. opposes converting any grass field to a synthetic field. 2. We urge you to support the County Executive's budget proposal to shift the money from synthetic surfaces to natural grass fields. 3. Remind you that you have the last word on the \$6.6 billion MCPS CIP and can make line item changes.

Before I close, we thank Council member Natali Fani-Gonzales for her work with the MCPS Student Climate Action Council on their Artificial Turfs Report in 2024. This thoughtful balanced report is worth reading and makes constructive recommendations.

Our sports fields are important to our athletes and our communities. We hope you will fund natural grass fields and maintain them fully.