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## Malibu Surfside News

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**It's One Green versus Another in the Synthetic Turf War**  
 • Issues of Health and Safety Surface to Challenge Maintenance Cost Savings

BY SUZANNE GULDIMANN

It may look green, but critics charge that synthetic turf is anything but environmentally friendly, and plans to install an artificial playing surface at the Malibu High School football stadium as part of the Measure BB improvement project are starting to come under fire from Malibu residents. A number of speakers during public comment at the Feb. 5 SMMUSD meeting in Malibu, blasted plans to install the artificial playing surface at the school.

James Edwards, a longtime Malibu resident and the principal of Oxnard High School, spoke out against the synthetic turf planned for the MHS playing field, citing multiple health hazards and injury concerns. He told Malibu Surfside News in a telephone interview that none of the high schools in his district have synthetic turf, despite the fact that they are all much larger than MHS and sponsor a higher number of field activities.

In a letter that appeared in the Feb. 12 Malibu Surfside News, Marshall Thompson, who is a Malibu Park resident and a member of the recently formed Malibu Park Safety Coalition, wrote that "The synthetic surface proposed for the athletic fields requires treatment with a number of sanitizing and maintenance chemicals, which can find their way into the ocean. The materials are also linked to dangerous multiple-drug resistant staph infections."

Malibu isn't the only community facing a synthetic turf battle. According to the Jan. 22 Mercury News, the San Jose Unified School District board of trustees recently voted no on artificial grass. In Connecticut, two legislators are proposing legislation to place moratoriums on new synthetic turf, in response to an announcement in that the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection is undertaking a yearlong study on the safety and environmental impact of artificial turf.

The New York City Council is also currently considering a temporary ban on artificial turf fields, after a recently installed field in Harlem was discovered to contain unsafe lead levels, and in September, 2008, California's attorney general filed suit against three artificial turf manufacturers, alleging that their products contain lead levels that exceed state-mandated limits. The Center for Environmental Health, a California-based watchdog organization, is pursuing legal action against several others, on the same charges.

Turf manufactures are defending their products, pointing out that many have voluntarily consented to meet new federal lead standards developed for toys and children's products as part of the Consumer Product Safety Act of 2008. However, critics claim that synthetic turf presents multiple environmental risks in addition to lead, which is used to color the material green and can also be found in the crumb rubber made of recycled shredded tires that is used as fill for most synthetic turf fields.

Synthetic turf can allegedly contain a cocktail of toxic chemicals and heavy metals, including chromium, arsenic, cadmium, benzopyrene and toluene—all substances that have the potential to cause cancer and other serious health concerns through direct contact and by leaching into soil and groundwater and contaminating runoff.

Critics of synthetic turf have also claimed that it can also lead to a higher incident of injury. A survey taken in 2004 by the NFL Players Association found that 85 percent of football players prefer to play on natural turf, citing a higher risk of injuries and fatigue on synthetic turf, which, unlike natural grass that remains cool due to transpiration, absorbs and retains heat, leading to the potential of increased heat related illness and injury. Allegations that the material harbors multiple-drug resistant staph, or MDRS have also surfaced.

Many professional athletes, including soccer icon David Beckham, have blasted synthetic surfaces. "As professional athletes, you can't play a game like soccer on that sort of field. The reaction of players and what it does to your body, as a soccer player, you [need] two or three days off for that. Every game, every team should have grass, without a doubt," Beckham told the Washington Post in 2007.

The Connecticut-based nonprofit health organization Environment and Human Health

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published a 2007 report on synthetic turf that stated that studies have conclusively demonstrate that the tire crumbs used as fill in synthetic turf "release chemical compounds into the air and ground water. Thus, tire crumbs constitute a chemical exposure for humans and for the environment."

The EHH report concluded that "There is enough information now concerning the potential health effects from chemicals emanating from rubber tire crumbs to place a moratorium on installing any new fields or playgrounds that use ground-up rubber tires until additional research is undertaken.

Drainage failures are another major concern, according to numerous reports, as is maintenance. Animal waste from birds or dogs cause the material to deteriorate as can sweat from players, sports drinks, sunflower seed hulls, salt air and wind-blown debris. Synthetic fields are also vulnerable to vandalism and not suitable for all spots activities.

"Birds and other wildlife will poop on it; chewing gum and other detritus becomes embedded in it," Marshall Thompson told The News in a telephone interview. "To keep it safe for players the surface is treated with expensive and toxic chemicals and their equally expensive machinery and of course the labor to keep it clean. Plastic grass gets very hot in sunlight so it requires periodic water sprinkling to keep field temperatures down to a comfortable level. Contaminated water runoff is a real concern with the ocean less than a half mile away," Thompson continued.

"There are no apparent savings to water usage or maintenance costs over natural grass turf. The single justification for plastic grass is that it withstands the wear and tear of much higher levels of use. Levels consistent with a regional sports facility, not the needs of a small local high school in a rural residential neighborhood," Thompson concluded.

Evidence presented at [www.athleticturf.net](http://www.athleticturf.net), which describes itself as an online resource for outdoor athletic field managers, confirms that the synthetic material requires extensive maintenance.

Measure BB plan consultant Tom Tomeoni at the Feb. 5 SMMUSD board meeting in Malibu also confirmed that the synthetic turf requires special maintenance, but stated the material is desirable because it can withstand more extensive use than grass.

There has not been any show of support for synthetic turf from the community to date. Its support base may become visible when the SMMUSD board of education hears more public comment on the issue when it meets in Malibu on March 5.

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