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Residents Demand Action From Township On Ball Field Issue

By Ryan Fennell

MIDDLETOWN - The people spoke loud and clear at a meeting of the Township Committee Tuand demanded that the Middletown Township Committee provide leadership and were unwilling to accept anything less.

Residents of Lincroft in the area of West Front Street and surrounding neighborhoods arrived at Monday night's Township Committee meeting to demand answers regarding a proposed multi-use athletic facility near the intersection of West Front Street and Everett Road.

Preliminary plans call for the installation of artificial turf at what is an existing grass athletic field. The need for an improved athletic field stems from the inadequate condition of Charger Field, the current field the local Pop Warner football teams use for games. The lack of a sufficient field for lacrosse within the Township would also be addressed.

However, what had the residents protesting the development are the proposed ancillary improvements, which include possible light towers, a public address system, and fencing. The public was also displeased with the lack of notification of these improvements.

"The sightlines are poor. Even if you double the size of the parking lot it won't be enough parking for Pop Warner football. I don't know why you would even look at this spot to play soccer, lacrosse, and football," said Everett Road resident Mary Mahoney. "According to your own policy the township will continue to seek public input and participation in all aspects of plan implementation. Where's the transparency here? None of us were approached. We knew nothing about it."

According to the Township Committee the original plan was to reach a shared services agreement with the Middletown Board of Education to construct a multi-use athletic facility at one of several Board of Education properties.

"When we first came to looking at the plan the initial goal was to work with the Board of Ed. for one of the fields at Thompson, Thorne, and Croyer," said Deputy Mayor Anthony Fiore. "We tried to work with the Board of Education and the Board of Education was not interested in working on those locations. I would love to share and have Pop Warner

play their games at (Middletown) South (High School). The Board of Ed. is unwilling to work with us."

According to Mahoney the Board of Education informed her that it "was not comfortable with the lack of response to questions" from the committee.

This comment generated audible laughter from several committee members as well as Township Attorney Brian Nelson.

"Every time they wanted to discuss something their lawyer sent a letter to my office," Nelson said. "They lawyered up and didn't want to communicate."

"We should have a public forum and listen to why we can't agree," Mahoney said.

Patty Dominach, a mother of children that have played Pop Warner football and a member of the Lincroft Presbyterian Church, situated directly across the street from the athletic field, expressed her concerns over the possible installation of a public address system at the field.

"When I'm not with my kids (at games) I want a place where I can go worship. I think this is irresponsible of the committee. The games currently played on Sunday mornings are between adults with no refs blowing whistles and there is no PA system. We have no air conditioning in our church and so the windows are open. I want to be able to hear the minister."

"We tried other locations and this is the only location that worked out," Committeeman Sean Byrnes said.

Byrnes said that Charger field has several problems and issues and the kids need a field that would pose less danger to their safety.

"It seems to make a lot of sense to play those Charger football games at the stadium at Middletown South," said Byrnes. "If we could work that kind of arrangement out, there wouldn't be a need for the PA system and that kind of thing. You would just be talking about turfing the fields. I think there would be a debate about the lights."

"How would there be a debate if we're not notified that this is going on?" Dominach retorted. "I feel like we need a watchdog committee to keep an eye on what you guys are doing."

Byrnes responded by saying that he did not believe this proposal has been completely in the dark noting that the committee has had several discussions at open public meetings and several articles on the subject have been written in area newspapers. However,

Byrnes said that the public had made a valid argument regarding the lack of notification.

According to Township Administrator Anthony Mercantante the development of the field did not require a review by the planning board, which is required when developing private property, because the field is Township property.

"You make a valid argument that perhaps the procedures that are used for Township property need to be changed to match up with those of private development so that we are engaging in that type of (process)," Byrnes said.

"We do need fields for our kids," Byrnes continued. "It just strikes me that that football field sitting there (at South), paid for by taxpayer dollars, there should be something done to try to push this toward that direction so that the games that you're most concerned about would be taking place in a spot that's already been designed and built for that."

"At the end of the day our schools are a community asset," said resident Jeff Blumengold. "And candidly, the easiest way to drive home a point is very simple. What do we do, rather than risk the safety, well-being and community values of the community we care about? If you won't tell us what to do, my recommendation is get a group together like those here in this room and stop the payment of property taxes until we get everyone in a room and work through this issue."

The attentive crowd applauded Blumengold's suggestion.

"Because," Blumengold continued. "I don't understand. I do not accept this 'lawyer-up' routine."

According to Board of Education Attorney Christopher Parton the statement made by Nelson was untrue.

"It's completely untrue that the board 'lawyered-up'. There are a lot of circumstances in which the Board designates me to be their spokesperson. It means I'm their spokesperson. It doesn't mean that they are hiding behind a lawyer nor that I'm making decisions independent of the Board," Parton said.

According to Parton the Township and the Board of Education entered into discussions regarding shared services in 2009. Parton said the fields under consideration were located at Thompson Middle School, Thorne Middle School, and Nutswamp Elementary School.

"The Board of Education was absolutely interested in pursuing that kind of project but they wanted to be sure any agreement along those lines would benefit both parties

without reducing the access and use of the fields by students," Parton said. "The Board seriously considered the logistics of the agreement possibilities and the value to the students and the taxpayers of having artificial turf fields at any of those sites. In September, after discussing the issue at length, the Board advised the Township Committee that usage and other concerns indicated that turf fields at Thompson or Thorne would not be optimal choices for locations."

"However," continued Parton. "The Board also advised the Township that pursuit of such a project on the property at Nutswamp would be beneficial to everybody and the Board was absolutely interested in doing that."

According to Parton, the Township Committee responded that it did not wish to pursue the project at Nutswamp and that it instead "chose to move forward with the construction of a field independently of the Board."

"That's basically where the discussions ended," Parton said. "The Board is still interested in a shared services agreement on the Nutswamp property, but that's the only place that it really makes sense."

Parton said that he is aware of discussions in the past about allowing Pop Warner to use the field at Middletown South but added he is not exactly aware of what the parties' positions are on that.

Mayor Gerard Scharfenberger said that he was aware the Board of Education agreed to pursue construction of a field at Nutswamp but said that topographical issues made the project at Nutswamp cost-prohibitive.

"From what I understand one of the reasons we didn't pursue that any further is that there are some geographical restraints. It was very hilly. It would've been very, very expensive, probably beyond what we could afford, to work with that field," Scharfenberger said.

Scharfenberger agreed with his fellow committeepersons that the use of the field at Middletown South would be ideal.

"That would be a huge plus for everybody involved, I think, to have access to their existing fields," said Scharfenberger. "In other towns it's the norm where the Pop Warner teams use school fields including high school fields."

Scharfenberger said that Rumson-Fair Haven, Hazlet, Keyport, and Holmdel all allow Pop Warner on the high school fields.

"There is a precedent for it being done," Scharfenberger said.

Scharfenberger added that in light of the attendance and opposition to the field at the West Front Street location he would meet with the township administrator to review the proposed plans.

"We certainly have to take (the concerns) into consideration," Scharfenberger said. "I'm going to review the plans. You want to try to do something that's going to satisfy everybody. Certainly we heard loud and clear the way the surrounding community feels. We don't have final plans. These are preliminary. We will review them and take into account (the public input)."