

Recreational fields remain an issue in Middletown

BY KEVIN PENTON • STAFF WRITER | **Asbury Park Press**, FEBRUARY 17, 2010

MIDDLETOWN — Township officials intend to ask the Board of Education to consider allowing Pop Warner football games to be played at High School South.

The decision to write the letter came after dozens of residents squeezed into Town Hall Monday to voice two opinions about recreational fields here.

Some Lincroft residents who live adjacent to West Front Street Park are opposed to a proposed renovation of the park that would add lights, a public announcement system and a snack stand to a current field. They say it would add traffic, parking congestion and noise to Lincroft.

"The character of the neighborhood would be tremendously impacted," Peter Simpson told the Township Committee.

Other residents said that for safety and aesthetic reasons, it is important that Middletown build two new turf fields.

"In other places, they talk about fields of dreams," Brian Cook said. "We're fields of fools. This is an embarrassment that the town can't invest in good fields."

Rather than at the West Front Street location, township officials had wanted to install the turf field at either the Thompson School or Thorne Middle School. The township would have paid for the construction and leased the land from the district. Sports such as field hockey, football, lacrosse and hockey could be played on it.

However, the Board of Education believed adding the sports to either school would have been disruptive for current activities and create a parking shortage, officials have said. It preferred seeing the field at Nut Swamp Elementary School, but the township found the site to be too hilly.

Conversations between representatives of the school district and the township broke off in September. In December, the township committee awarded a \$194,700 contract for engineering work on the proposed fields in Lincroft and Croydon Hall to CMX Engineering of Manalapan.

Many proponents of the fields who spoke Monday said they are not attached to seeing them installed at West Front Street Park, as long as the improvements are made somewhere in town.

"We just want a facility that can accommodate us," said Loreen Cody, cheer coordinator for the River Plaza Youth Club.

Likewise, many of the Lincroft residents who spoke said they support the committee adding the turf fields to the park for practice use as long as hundreds of people don't descend on their neighborhood for live games on weekends.

"No one wants children to be injured," resident Dan Williams said.

Township Administrator Anthony Mercantante, who intended to draft the letter to the school board Tuesday, said the turf field cannot be added to where Pop Warner football games are currently played because of wetlands issues.

While plans have yet to be finalized, Mercantante said he anticipates that the West Front Street Park could accommodate up to 150 parking spaces — some lined and paved, others on grass. The site currently has about 50 spaces, he said.

During their weeks of discussions, township and school officials never discussed the possibility of Pop Warner teams practicing at West Front Street Park and playing home games at High School South a half-dozen or so Sundays a year, he said.

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