



## Montclair Athletics: District proceeding carefully on turf replacement



*The Montclair Board of Education is being very careful in crafting its plan to replace the turf at Fortunato Field.*  
PHOTO BY ANDREW GARDA/STAFF

by Andrew Garda

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When the Montclair school district installed the turf at Woodman, Fortunato and Watchung fields about 15 years ago, things were a bit simpler. In the years since, the choices in artificial turf at a park, school or other public place have expanded greatly.

Which is one of the reasons the Montclair Board of Education is being very careful in crafting its plan of action and one of several reasons why the project has recently been pushed back.

This is especially true when it comes to infill, the substance which sits between the turf fiber or “grass blades” and the backing layer, which is what the “blades” are sewn on to. Infill provides cushioning as well.

And as any parent can tell you, it sneaks into an athlete’s cleats and tracks all over your house.

So it should come as no surprise that both the BOE and parents are concerned with what the infill is made up of. There have been concerns that the crumb rubber infill, which has been common for so many years, contains toxins such as benzene, arsenic, lead and zinc. The Children’s Environmental Health Center at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City put together both a Health Based Consumer Guide to Artificial Turf and a Position Statement on the use of recycled tires — what rubber infill is generally made out of — in artificial turf surfaces.

In the position statement, Mount Sinai wrote that “based upon the presence of known toxic substances in tire rubber and the lack of comprehensive safety studies, The Children’s Environmental Health Center of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai urges a moratorium on the use artificial turf generated from recycled rubber tires.”

This has certainly concerned residents and parents, some of which have stood up to speak at BOE meetings. Suzanne Aptman is one of many local parents who has stepped up during open comments.



*Fortunato Field is home to many teams, including the boys lacrosse team, and the surface will have an impact on a tremendous amount of athletes.*

*PHOTO BY ANDREW GARDA/STAFF*

“It started for me having sons who play on Brookdale’s artificial turf field,” Aptman said when reached for comment. “Tracking home those rubber particles and crumbs on their soccer sneakers and all over my house. I heard other parents complain about that and concerns about toxicity.”

Aptman began looking into the issue, reading up about the potential toxicity, as well as various cities and towns moving away from the rubber pellet infill, including New York City’s Parks Departments and Essex County.

It was Aptman who brought the information first to the Essex County Environmental Commission and then the Montclair Environmental Commission. During their June 13 meeting, the commission decided it would forward support for alternative infill choices to the BOE.

Meanwhile, the board was also pushing for more information at its June 18 meeting, with Joe Kavesh asking for health information regarding health concerns like concussions while Jessica de Koninck and Eve Robinson requested breakdowns on chemical compositions.

Franklin Turner asked about grass.

The problem with grass is cost more than anything else. While you pay once for the turf and some minimal upkeep, grass needs constant maintenance. That would mean times when the field couldn’t be used, which would be a loss of revenue, while requiring more personnel, equipment and time to keep the grass usable and safe.

As the Montclair Board of Education continues its research, parents like Aptman are hoping they avail themselves of resources like Mount Sinai. She echoes what Robinson said at the June 13 meeting as well, that a long-term investment like a field needs to be approached thoughtfully.

“When it comes to potential health impacts, especially potential impacts on children and teen health, we should follow the precautionary principle, as other countries do,” she said. “This principle supports non-exposure to or non-use of a substance unless it has been proven safe. Unfortunately, too many substances in

this country are deemed to be safe until they are proven harmful. That's a risky approach to public health."