



of the Anacostia River
P.O. Box 4314
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Testimony on HB 1098: Use of Public Funds - Playground and Athletic Field Surfaces - Authorizations, Preferences, and Prohibitions (Safe and Healthy Fields Act)

Lead Sponsor: Delegate Solomon

Hearing in the House Appropriations Committee: 3/5/20 at 1:00 p.m.

Position: SUPPORT

Dear Chairman McIntosh and members of the Appropriations Committee:

I submit this testimony in support of HB1098 on behalf of the Neighbors of the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River (NNWB), a 501(c)(3) volunteer organization dedicated to the ecological restoration of the Northwest Branch, with over 200 members and supporters in Montgomery and Prince Georges counties. While our primary focus is water quality, we are also parents whose children play on these fields and taxpayers whose money is being spent on them. I want to thank Delegate Solomon and all the cosponsors of this bill, who have had the foresight to recognize that installing artificial turf fields is a major mistake on many levels.

Scale of the problem: The fiscal note for HB1118 (2019) reported 56 synthetic athletic fields funded in part with Program Open Space funds, plus an unknown number of playgrounds with synthetic ground cover. It noted also that fields and playgrounds constructed under the Community Parks and Playgrounds Program and the Public School Construction Program used synthetic surfaces, and cited 13 playgrounds in state parks using them as well. That's a lot of synthetic surfaces installed using public money.

NNWB began to raise the alarm about artificial turf as early as 2009. With now more than a decade of experience with synthetic turf fields, our state has had time enough to realize just how bad these investments of public money have been from the perspective of **child health, environmental health, and as it has now become obvious, fiscal health.**

Child health: Children suffer injuries such as joint stress, concussion, MRSA infection, and turf burns.ⁱ Synthetic turf is composed of toxic substances that off-gas and disintegrate. They “fail” when they become hard and dangerous to play on. Why? Because half the length of the blades has disintegrated into dust that players breathe and eat. Turf dust contains neurotoxins such as lead, mercury, and carbon black; carcinogens and endocrine disruptors such as phthalates; zinc, Round-Up (glyphosate), a carcinogen, to control weeds, biocides to control MRSA, and fire retardants. Most recently it has been discovered that to make the liquid plastic easily extrude into blades, turf manufacturers add a PFAS, a “forever chemical” so named because it bio-accumulates and never goes away. This is the chemical family described in the film *Dark Waters*, used in Teflon, Goretex, and Scotchguard. Dupont poisoned a whole community by releasing it into the river water supply and ground water. Why would we actually *fund* spreading this toxin?

In addition, these fields become very hot, as you would expect from something made from oil. We measured the Blair field at 160 degrees when the ambient temperature was in the 80s. And that is clearly not as bad as it gets.ⁱⁱ The soles of players’ feet blister and burn on these fields.

No government agency requires safety standards, testing, or monitoring of any of the toxins or of the excessive heat of these fields on a sunny day. Maryland’s children and youth are being exposed like lab rats to a host of toxins from toddlerhood on up, and we’re using public money to do it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Environmental health: Much of that toxic dust that leaves the fields making them hard, migrates into our streams via storm drains, a threat for aquatic life. Further, what do you do with 300,000 to 540,000 pounds of toxic material *per field* (calculation by University System of Maryland, 2019 fiscal note for HB1142)? Many fields are simply rolled up and dumped—on private or public land,^{iv} where after being a heat island during their active life, they go on to leach their brew, including zinc, toxic to aquatic life, into Maryland waters.

Fiscal health: Another of the lessons learned during Maryland’s more than a decade of installing synthetic turf is that fields wear out faster than expected—Blair H.S.’s field lasted just 6 years—and that worn out fields are exceedingly difficult and expensive to dispose of properly. First, the cost just to remove a field is about \$300,000. Second, **there are no facilities in the U.S. to actually recycle turf**, that is, break apart the different kinds of plastic so that the materials can be made into new plastic objects. Some markets exist for tire crumb and for reusable pieces as spot lawns, dog runs, and batting cages, but with more than 10,000 fields in the U.S. seeking disposal, each approximately 9600 square yards, the market will soon be saturated. Further, at some point these too must be disposed of. And now that Asia doesn’t want our plastic waste anymore, many are simply dumped, as previously noted.

Conclusion: It is time we stopped using state funds to launch cities and counties on this very expensive treadmill of installing a dangerous product that must be removed, disposed of, and replaced at great expense about every 7-10 years. Why subject ourselves to this fiscal pit—especially now that remarkable advances have been made in durable grass playing fields? **HB1098 wisely encourages healthy grass fields by allowing Program Open Space money for their maintenance and drainage systems, while prohibiting the use of state funds to finance any portion of a project to build a new or replace an existing playground or athletic field with synthetic surfaces. Please report favorably on HB1098.** Thank you for the opportunity to comment.



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ⁱ See the collection of youth and adult witnesses to the hazards of playing on synthetic turf at <https://www.safehealthyplayingfields.org/injuries-and-player-preference>.

ⁱⁱ See heat information: <https://www.safehealthyplayingfields.org/heat-levels-synthetic-turf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Stuart Shalat, Professor and Director of the Division of Environmental Health, School of Public Health, Georgia State University, <https://theconversation.com/why-artificial-turf-may-truly-be-bad-for-kids-72044> and <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/weed-whacking-herbicide-p/>

^{iv} See <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/12/artificial-turf-fields-are-piling-no-recycling-fix/603874/>