

January 20, 2017

Legends Field Renovation Committee

Dear Members:

I have a long and personal history with Rawson Field. I attended my first football game there with my family in the late 1950's. As a high school football player, I played my first game as a freshman on the field in 1966, and my last game as a senior in 1970 was as a captain on the FHS State Championship team. In 1985, School District #5 hired me as a teacher and coach. I was an assistant coach from 1985 until my resignation in 2003. Beginning in 2004, I began a second career as an MOA football official. I continued to coach track at FHS until 2016. Few people have spent as much time on that field as I have, so I believe I have insight that may be helpful in deciding between natural or artificial turf. My belief is that the time is right to make the change to artificial turf. Here's why I believe that:

History:

As far back as I can remember, the field has been unsuitable for play. Old timers claim that the area around the field was always swampy and that the field itself has a base of clay. It has never drained properly. During my four years in high school, the field never lasted through the season. Sand, sawdust, dirt, and other materials were brought in each year to try to get the field in playing condition for the final weeks of the year. During my years of coaching at FHS, when it was just one team using the field, it was the same. In time, underground sprinkling was added, which helped the condition of the field at the beginning of the year, but drainage issues in the latter months of the season continued to be a problem. Over years, the addition of extra material has caused an abnormal crown to develop on the field. As an official, late season games on Rawson are difficult for players and officials alike. This year, by the time the crosstown game was to be played, I felt the field was nearly unplayable.

Economics:

I have seen the figures on the cost of installing artificial turf, and I believe that in the long run, the cost will be worth the product. Not figured in to the costs is the benefit the turf may bring to the community. Currently, Rawson is unacceptable to playing soccer. With the renovation and artificial turf, I can see that bids for state soccer could be a yearly endeavor. One would have to assume that there would be yearly savings also from the need to not have to water, mow, fertilize or paint the field. The water and mowing now begins in the spring and runs throughout the football season.

Safety:

I know that a number of concerns are out there regarding the safety of participants. Early artificial turf is little more than outdoor carpet over a concrete-like base. Knee injuries and concussions were common. However, the newest products are much more realistic and forgiving. Two years ago, I officiated a state AA semi-final game in Billings on their artificial field. The temperature was in the teens, yet the footing was excellent for all

involved. I know people have questioned the rubber pellets as being carcinogenic, but as you're A.D.'s have reported, the science is sketchy and alternatives exist. One of the concerns I have had as an official the past several years is the poor condition of Rawson Field. Even when drainage is not the issue, the field is uneven and several sprinkler heads may pose a risk of injury.

Equality:

I have heard some members of the community questioning whether is equitable for FHS to have an artificial turf field while Glacier does not. I would remind the committee members that Rawson Field is part of the Legends Stadium complex for all of School District #5. With the addition of Glacier, the amount of games played on Rawson has increased adding to the wear on natural grass. Billings, Missoula, Helena, and Great Falls all share a community field. Billings, Missoula, and soon Great Falls all play on artificial fields. In terms of equality, by adding an artificial capable of holding soccer games, you will be giving that sport an equal footing.

School administrators have done an outstanding job of renovation at Legends Stadium over the past decade. It is becoming one of the premier athletic event venues in the state. By stepping into the 21st century and adding the new artificial turf along with the additional seating and other changes, it will be the top spot in the state. Thank you for allowing my input.

Sincerely,
Joe Sullivan