



PROACTIVE SPORTS TURF MANAGEMENT

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I have just finished reading through the Sports Turf Association's new *Athletic Field Construction Manual* (AFCM). Written by renowned and respected turf experts, this manual is a valuable tool that can help sports turf professionals make sense of all the varying and sometimes conflicting technical information with which they often find themselves swamped. One of the merits of this manual is that it can help initiate a fertile discussion among concerned sports turf professionals. Hopefully, it will also foster a broader exchange of their individual experiences, so that the construction classification system that is outlined can be enriched with other components and alternate approaches. These can be added to the array of tools that the industry can resort to in order to provide the public with increasingly better quality sports surfaces.

The references section of this document should not be overlooked. Here the STA has outlined the many other sources of technical information and specialized publications available – both from Canadian authors and others abroad. These resources offer alternative approaches and widen the knowledge base available to the industry in order to help us find solutions to our specific technical challenges.

The Cornerstone of Sports Field Management

Beyond the strictly technical, construction related content of this manual, I want to reflect on one section that I feel merits

closer examination. In Chapter Three, the authors address an issue referred to as “permitting.” They introduce the notion of limiting the usage to which the different sports field construction categories are subjected. Another approach to this is what can be called “specific usage capacity.” Either way, this specific notion transcends mere technical considerations and may be the beacon that signals one of the directions that the search for improved playing surfaces could explore in the future. For whatever systems are put in place, whatever techniques are adopted and whatever budgets are allotted and resources are deployed, if the playing surface is subjected to overuse or misuse, all

technical discussion is in vain and condemned to irrelevance because the desired results cannot be obtained and the surfaces are destined for deterioration.

Because of this, the very notion that sports surfaces have an inherently finite capacity to support punishment and stress is pivotal to a new approach to sports field management that ensures users have access to the field quality they desire and deserve.

Unfortunately, sports turf managers rarely have control over this specific parameter. They are usually required to provide maintenance and repairs to sports surfaces over which they have no control. Usage schedules are often devised by oth-

ers whose main priority is to provide the users with the playing time they demand. Consequently, managing within constraints imposed by usage capacity is seldom one of their preoccupations since it comes into conflict with their main mission. Also, too often, sports turf managers have had no say in the design of the sports fields they must now manage. They are stuck with poorly designed or ill adapted systems and constrained by ridiculously insufficient budgets and resources. Sports turf managers can find themselves at the receiving end of a design, construction and programming process with which they have not been involved and that has not taken their technical and budgetary limitations into account.

Each playing surface has its own capacity to sustain use, whatever the construction type, the design, or its inherent flaws. If this capacity is not exceeded and proper maintenance is provided, any

sports surface can provide adequate service – however poorly designed or badly built it is. But, the control of sports field usage is rarely left in the hands of those whose job it is to maintain surface quality. This is why it is more than urgent that a dialogue be initiated between sports turf managers and the other participants in this endeavor so that common objectives may be formulated and a coordinated plan put into motion. For this reason, the notion of usage capacity or “permitting hours” as the AFCM calls it, is to me the cornerstone of this process.

Communications in Sports Field Planning & Management

In municipalities, we often find that sports field management is a dialogue among the deaf. Users clamor for ever increasing access to sports surfaces. They pressure their elected officials, who in turn, after some resistance, comply, approve budgets and entrust technical de-

partments with the responsibility of building a new field or renovating an existing one. Once this is done, the recreation department is charged with organizing its schedules to accommodate users, which they often do with little consideration for technical issues and constraints. At the receiving end of this process, sports field managers are asked to provide maintenance and ensure acceptable surface quality.

Most often, these managers must cope with limited, if not grossly insufficient, budgets and gross overuse of the surfaces. Maintenance budgets are rarely considered at the start of the process – a situation that reflects a misunderstanding from the outset of natural sports surfaces’ inherent limits. Of course, managers end up requesting more money. They’re told that more money has not produced results in the past so why would it now? At this stage, it rarely occurs to the decision makers that results were not attained because

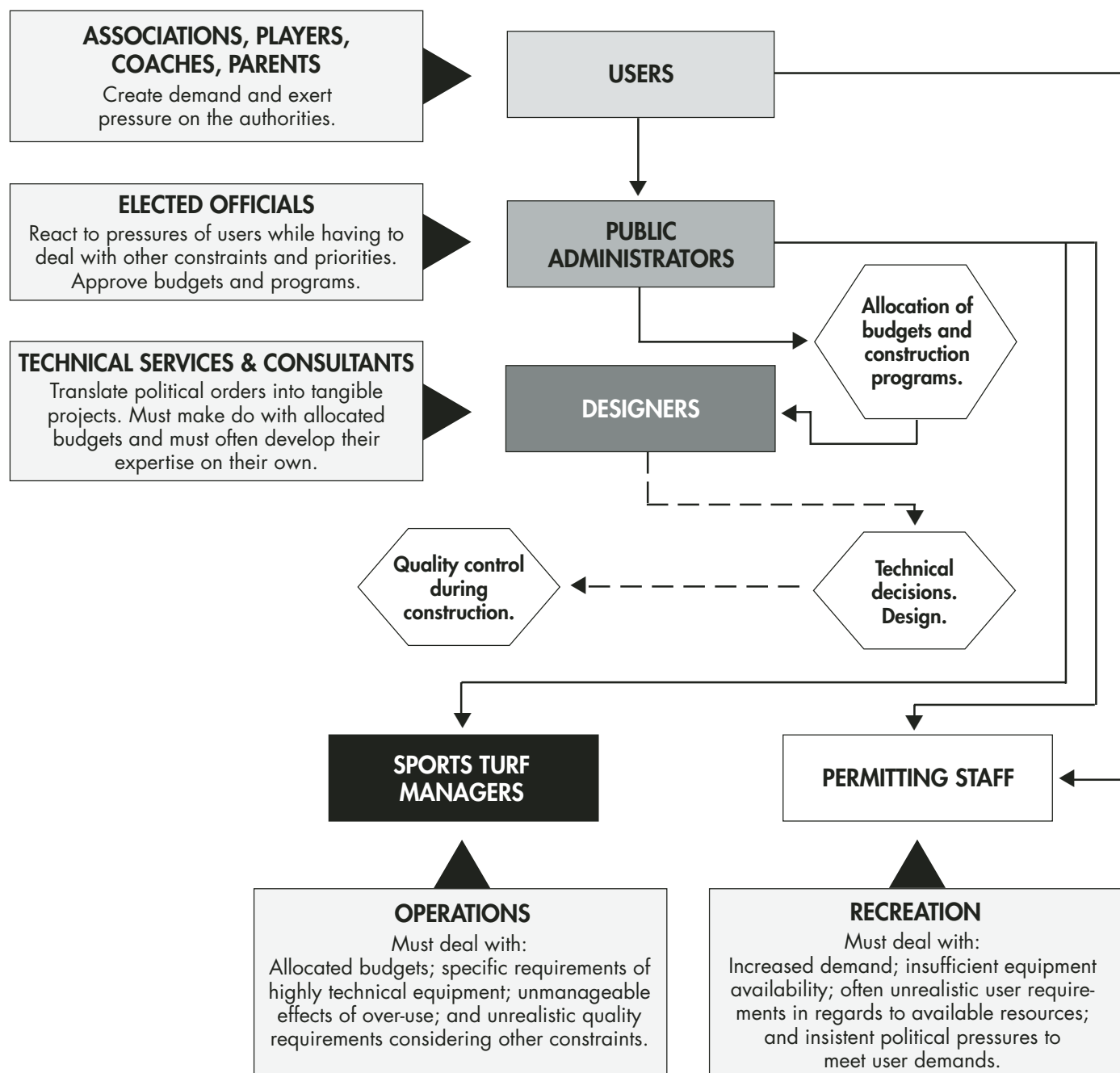
Athletic Field Construction Manual

CLASSIFICATION | SPECIFICATIONS | FIELD EVALUATION | FIELD DIMENSIONS



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Figure 1: The traditional linear decision-making process.



favourable conditions simply were not present.

It is ironic that the title “Sports Turf Manager” usually applies to those who are left carrying the blame for a process which is flawed from the beginning and who most often have the least influence in the planning and management process. Sports turf management is most often limited to the process of providing maintenance and repairs to surfaces. This is a profession in itself, and a very honourable one at that.

But to deprive managers of direct involvement in the aforementioned process and the setting of usage guidelines and rules can only lead to poor results. In fact, we find that the communication paths only go one way and lead to dead-ends. There is very little communication among the different parties involved. This is the root of many of the problems that plague sports field management in municipalities. That those who have the most practical knowledge are not closely involved in the deci-

sion making and design process makes no sense, and the results usually bear testimony to this.

Proactive Management Approach

Recently, I was asked what direction I thought the sports turf industry would take in the future. My initial response as a designer could have been about innovations in drainage techniques or some other new products that are appearing on the market. But instead, I replied that the future of

sports fields lies in a revolution in management approaches. The demand for sports playing surfaces has been increasing for years and municipalities have not been able to keep up with this demand. Today, economic realities are such that resources are becoming increasingly scarce while demand increases. For municipalities to surrender to this unbridled demand is no longer an option and the onus to provide quality and safe surfaces can no longer be put solely on sports turf managers.

Management must become more proactive so that overuse can be controlled. Construction types must be adapted not only to intended sports performance and user demands, but also to available maintenance resources and know-how. Usage limits must be set and management tools devised so that these limits are respected. We now live in an era of sustainable development and in the matter of sports turf management, sustainability means that poorly planned and costly municipal installations cannot continue.

There are different ways to provide players with the quality playing surfaces they demand. In an ideal world, municipalities can make more funds available in order to build enough sports fields and ensure proper maintenance. Of course, if they had the means, they probably would have done this already. Another way is to control usage in order to limit it within the overall usage capacity of the municipality's existing fields. Inevitably, this will meet with the resistance of users who will exert pressure on public administrators who in turn will pressure permitting staff to release more access time. And we find ourselves back to square one.

Alternatively, a better grasp of construction and maintenance techniques is a worthy step. In this sense, the AFCM is an important tool on which to build. In its pages we find a wealth of information. It introduces notions that can be built on to elaborate a broader view of sports turf management. The technical aspect of sports field construction and management is very important to help increase the usage capacity for the inventory of playing surfaces within the municipality. We should see this manual evolve as future editions are published. We should also probably see the appearance of synthetic

fields in the manual's recognized categories because, whether we like it or not, they are an important new tool in our arsenal and to reject them out of hand would be a mistake.

But to only rely on the technical aspects of sports field construction will not solve the problems generated by rampant overuse. The problems originate and must be managed earlier in the planning process. The equation between the demand for playing hours and usage capacity must be addressed from the outset. This is the determining factor and if the balance cannot be attained by technique, then it must be tackled by the demand side. Does this mean that demand may have to be curbed? Unfortunately, the short answer is yes.

A Communication-Based Process

Improved communication between the various parties involved is essential to ensure that the industry can provide answers to the needs of users. The users must also become an integral part of the management team and strategy because they are the ones straining the system. Common goals must be defined and consensus must be attained on the ways to reach them. To do this, communication must be established among all participants.

In a modern organization faced with tight budgetary constraints, it is unproductive for certain elements to be kept isolated from the rest. In sports turf management, administrators, designers, planners, permitting staff and users must support those entrusted with the maintenance of playing surfaces. This must be

come a joint effort aimed at a common goal. To achieve this, all must put aside their own personal interests and agendas. A clear picture of the existing situation must be drawn for all to see. Each participant must put forward his needs while his constraints and limitations are also considered.

Proactive management means that rational objectives are set and tools are formulated to meet them. For instance, if it is determined that usage limits are to be set and respected, it is futile to presume that these will immediately be adopted by users and willingly enforced by permitting staff. Usage control means that physical barriers may need to be erected. Games may need to be cancelled and playing calendars lightened or shortened to allow for seasonal maintenance operations to be conducted and the sports fields to rest between periods of intense use. We are talking here about the end of the reign of the user over a municipality's sports fields.

Just as other municipal installations and equipment is cared for so that the investment that they represent is protected, the same approach needs to be adopted with sports surfaces. For instance, it may be tempting for a municipality to build a sand based field, if only because of the image of affluence this conveys. But, to do so, the necessary maintenance budget must also be allocated and the necessary expertise developed in the maintenance staff. If not, simpler, less demanding systems need to be considered. You cannot claim to support sustainable development without such an approach.

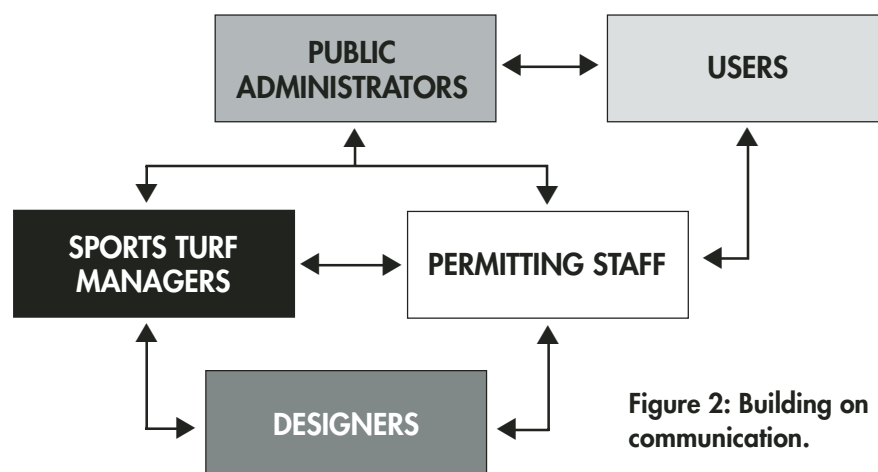


Figure 2: Building on communication.



If available usage levels or permitting hours are insufficient to meet demand, these will need to be increased in some way or another, or usage will need to be reduced. It is all a game of give and take. In order to work, this give and take must be negotiated among involved parties and not imposed unilaterally. This is why communication is so important and consensus is essential. Without these, the fight to curb overuse will at best result in continuous confrontation between users and those

having to manage tighter budgets while their populations demand more accountability coupled with better quality services and installations. In the past, recreation departments were often asked to satisfy the needs of the users, independent of costs or consequences. Today, departments must account for their actions and produce tangible results.

Recreation is often seen as a service that affects directly the image projected by elected officials. Sports organizations con-

ficult to attain. To balance the two requires tact but also a resolute approach, one that is inclusive so as to elicit the participation and adherence of users and others to the ultimate goal which is to provide the population with quality sports surfaces.

The first edition of the Sports Turf Association's *Athletic Field Construction Manual* is a valuable contribution to the effort towards better sports surfaces for our populations. It introduces useful notions, such as "permitting hours." To clearly establish maintenance costs associated with the different construction categories is also very responsible, for it helps fight the myth that providing sports surfaces is cheap. This puts a damper on the attraction higher construction systems may have. With time, this manual could look in more detail into slit drainage and manufactured soils (sand:soil:organic material blends) as valid and useful construction components. And inevitably, I believe a chapter on synthetic turf fields will appear in these pages.

But, this manual is aimed specifically at the sports turf manager. To attain significant results, other participants will need to be invited into the discussion so that all involved can contribute to the ultimate goal of providing users with the best quality sports fields possible. ♦

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Long gone is the time of unlimited resources and wasteful practices. For years now, municipalities have been faced with having to manage tighter budgets while their populations demand more accountability coupled with better quality services and installations.

stuck holding the fort. This is an untenable situation.

What is described here implies that concessions may need to be made and existing practices altered. This inevitably generates resistance from those who are required to change their ways. This is why it is important that all agree from the very beginning to a set of objectives that the plan is meant to attain. Attaining those objectives is the ultimate goal, but also the ultimate prize.

Sports Field Management in the 21st Century.

Long gone is the time of unlimited resources and wasteful practices. For years now, municipalities have been faced with

stitute a powerful, well organized and very vocal lobby in municipalities and elected officials are very receptive to their demands. The pressure is transmitted directly to the recreation departments, who may be tempted to acquiesce to these demands, however disproportionate they may be.

But such an approach has a direct impact on the quality of facilities. And, as the demand for access to playing surfaces has increased, so has the sophistication of the users. Litigation is also a concern, and while safety may not have been such an issue in the past, it is now an ever present preoccupation. Because of this, neglect and inaction are no longer options.

At best, the equation between demand and the quality of provided services is dif-

Above: Faced with having to curb their usage, sport enthusiasts will soon be won over when they see and experience the results that can be obtained by proactive sports turf management.