

# Q&A



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## Questions?

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# I've seen this movie before

*I am a parent of a student-athlete and volunteer with our local high school in preparing their baseball field. I have an agriculture background but it does not include turf-grass except for what I have picked up the past few years while working on the field. The school has decided that it is finally time for a major renovation to address the field's significant drainage problem and the poor infield grass. Do you do this type of work and can you give us an estimate of what it would cost?*

*North Carolina*

It is not unusual to get these types of questions from schools several times a year. The questions almost always have the same elements—concerned volunteer, functional problems with a field, and financial constraints. The problems with the field have often been tolerated for years and a tipping point has finally been reached. That point is often reached after the “volunteer” has heavily lobbied the school administration for a change and they are given a go-ahead to investigate. Then I get an e-mail or phone call, hoping the University can jump-start the process.

From the broad “need help” perspective, these are generally long-term matters that are not easily addressed with a simple response. My experience from an extension specialist perspective has been that political, emotional, and financial influences combine to make these matters complex. Often the school is not fully prepared for how much it may cost to properly renovate their field, so the project may never pass the fact-finding stage. Then all the dynamics of the people involved with planning and approving, plus back-door politics that can doom a project.

My initial role is to bring a group together that can get their arms around the entire project, not

just one facet. I usually provide a list of Certified Field Builders that work in their area. In North Carolina we have some great ones, so this is an easy step for me. I am happy to work with a school in their discussions with a builder if they want an unbiased intermediary to help them with terminology or processes. With adequate funding up front and good weather during renovation, these projects often end with happy customers.

I will assist as much as possible to educate people to try and minimize the influence of politics, while staying out of the price aspects. My contribution often includes agronomic information for items such as grassing specifications, grow-in programs, maintenance calendars, etc., that can be useful in pre-bid or post-construction.

Recently, I visited a high school football field at the request of a volunteer. I met with a volunteer, several coaches, the athletic director, and a county operations representative. I could feel the tension among them in the pre-inspection meeting. After a field assessment, I left and promised I would get back with them within a couple of days. The field was in horrible shape.

That afternoon I called a field builder and was bouncing a few scenarios past him without mentioning any school names. He immediately called out the name of the school field I had visited. He said that he had been to that field four or five times over the past several years and they could never seem to get all the needed pieces together to get the field re-built. His visits spanned several coaches and athletic administrators, but with the same county representative. Guess who was not on board! And to some extent that can be understandable. The worse shape the field is in, the more work it needs,

may translate to greater cost. Someone has to pay for the work and no group seems to have much extra money in their budget.

The previous example is a good reminder why enthusiastic volunteers and eager coaches are not always enough to push through a successful field renovation. School boards and county officials also have to see the need for renovation before they are prepared to see them done correctly. I emphasize “correctly” because nothing is worse than visiting a 1- to 3-year old field that was constructed so poorly that it needs to be bulldozed and started new.

This was the case in one of the fields I visited last year. I was asked to come out to this new school and inspect their baseball field, especially the clay base paths and warning track. The coach told me that his players picked up so much infield clay on their cleats running bases that they were 6 inches taller by the time they reach 2nd base. A local individual had sold them a clay-based soil he said was suitable for a ballfield skinned area. The school had not budgeted for the needed clay replacement.

So the answer to the question is not so simple. I do that type of work, but I do not do it the way they probably imagined. I think my extension colleagues across the US would respond similarly. We want all parties to envision and accept the entire process and what it means to the school and the participants that use the field. Then we want to help them find the best people to accomplish the renovation. I do not price out projects. But I have found field builders to be generous people that are willing to work with varying budgets. In the end, we all just want better fields. ■