

“Field Fertilization is Not a Vanity Issue”, Public Works Says

FIELD FERTILIZATION continues to be a _____ Source Of Controversy In Lacey Township

By Elaine Piniat

SFMANJ Editor's Note: Two SFMANJ Members (J. Casey Parker, Lacey Township Dept. of Public Works; and Bradley Park, Rutgers University and Editor, SFMANJ Update) were interviewed for this article that appears courtesy of the LaceyPatch, an online a community-specific news and information platform dedicated to providing comprehensive and trusted local coverage for individual towns and communities (visit at lacey.patch.com). The article appeared on April 19, 2011; see: <http://lacey.patch.com/articles/field-fertilization-is-not-a-vanity-issue-public-works-says>

While many are looking to cut back on costs, **Casey Parker**, Director of Public Works, emphasizes the importance of fertilizing the township fields.

“A lot of people think it’s a vanity thing. It’s not just because we want our grass green. Safety is the core issue. Fertilization is a part of an overall component of the management of an athletic facility,” **Parker** said.

In March, there was a debate among committee members over the necessity of field fertilization leading to a 3-2 vote to pay the bills for TruGreen.

“After what we have invested in parks and fields we have a duty to the taxpayer to maintain them,” Mayor Gary Quinn said. “We all want to reduce dollars and save money for the taxpayers but let’s not do something tonight that we’ll all regret in five years.”

Committee members Sean Sharkey and Helen DelaCruz were opposed, stating that fertilization should be cut back and that if they were short money personally, they wouldn’t fertilize their lawns.

Residents have continuously voiced opposition to fertilizing the fields as often as the township does. In a recent “Question of the Day,” Patch asked, “Should the fertilization of township fields be cut?” Over 87 percent of the responses were opposed to the current fertilization plan.

“Most homeowners can barely afford to fertilize their own lawns once or twice a year. With proper mowing and watering and perhaps a twice a year fertilization, the grass will grow fine. The money really needs to go back to the residents by lowering their property taxes,” one resident said.

But athletic fields are a different type of turfgrass scenario compared to residential lawns due to the heavy traffic and use by athletes, said Bradley Park, Sports Turf Research and Education Coordinator for the Department of Plant Science at Rutgers University.

Park, also a member of the New Jersey Turfgrass Association (NJTA) added that nitrogen fertilization is a primary strategy for turf to recover from damage.

“You’re dealing with a playing surface and this playing surface is subject to use by athletes so the turf is going to decline in density and quality as a result of field play,” **Park** said. “In order to force that plant to recover from the damage that’s incurring due to use, fertilization is an important tool in the tool box to manage grass that is subject to wear and tear.”

Lacey Township uses a five-step program for their fields which includes the following:

1. Early Spring: Preemergence weed control
2. Late Spring: Preemergence and fertilization
3. Early Summer: Grub control and fertilization
4. Fall: Postemergence weed control and fertilization
5. Final: Fertilization and put turf to bed

The fertilization plan also includes slow-release nitrogen, a requirement in Gov. Chris Christie’s plan to protect the Barnegat Bay, which takes effect in 2012.

Parker said they have incorporated nitrogen slow-release into their plan for years and put the condition in the call for bids. Fertilization will contain no more than .75 pounds of Nitrogen.

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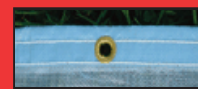
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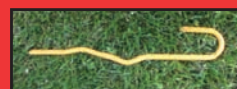
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The field fertilization done by TruGreen in 2011 will cost \$25,800 while fertilization by Meticulous Landscaping in 2012 will cost \$26,250.

Parker explained that they do not do anything during the summer months to control fungus or weeds, which most golf courses and some field management do.

"It's not excessive. It's probably average. It takes care of our needs and it provides enough feeding and nutrients to sustain a reasonably good stand of grass," **Parker** said.

Park, took into account the amount of events held at the township parks and agreed that the field fertilization strategy is not unreasonable.

"High traffic athletic fields require high maintenance. The maintenance that goes into those fields has to fit the use characteristic for that field," **Park** said.

The fields would decline in quality if fertilization were cut back, both **Parker** and **Park** said.

A field could deteriorate after one football game played in adverse weather conditions, **Park** said.

Parker added if field management is limited, other plants would begin to take over and the fields would deteriorate quickly.

"It's kind of the domino effect if you start by eliminating the feeding process," **Parker** said.

When feeding and weed control is stopped, weeds are more aggressive, **Parker** said. The weeds don't need water or nutrients; they thrive on the environment.

Once the weeds take over, they choke the grass causing bare spots to develop, **Parker** said. Then the ground becomes hard and compact, losing drainage qualities and limiting play on the fields. The fields would become uneven and rutty with holes, which are in turn hazards.

"Cutting the fertilization schedule or the frequency is not in our best interest," **Parker** said.

If fields are let go, they could be shut down for as long as a year while the township rehabilitates them, **Park** said.

The fertilization is just a part of the turf management process in Lacey Township, **Parker** said. Public Works cuts grass and does core aerating and irrigation in-house.

While other townships may do fertilization in-house, Lacey Township's Public Works outsources fertilization because of liability with licensing, storage of materials and application equipment, **Parker** said.

The Barnegat, Berkeley, and Brick Township recreation directors did not immediately return calls to comment about their fertilization programs.

In 2003, Lacey Township received an award from the NJTA recognizing their facilities and in 2009 the township won "Field of the Year" from the **Sports Field Managers Association of New Jersey (SFMANJ)**.

"I visit a lot of fields throughout the state, and I would say ... in terms of field complexes and turf quality, he's got some of the best facilities in the state," **Park** said.

Park has seen fields be let go. In North Jersey, **Park** said many fields are bare soil, with a lot of weeds, and poor quality playing surface.

"Those towns that do nothing but mow, paint lines, and groom infields, their fields are in the poorest condition," **Park** said. "**Parker** is doing a very good job maintaining Lacey's public assets. If some of the community saw other facilities and saw how poorly maintained they are, they might have another viewpoint."

One board of education let their fields go and called **Park** in for advice. **Park** said he recommended seeding, fertilization, mowing, a better job irrigating, and an increase in management inputs.

"I was very impressed with Hebrew Park. It would be unfortunate to see that field go in the other direction," **Park** said.

"All this work that we've been doing for the last 18 to 20 years, what are you going to do, just let it go? At what price," **Parker** said.

Elaine Piniat is Editor, Lacey Patch (www.lacey.patch.com).

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