



The Many Challenges of Sports Turf Management in a School Board Environment

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In this article, I will cover some of the challenges associated with managing sports turf within the school board setting – and I’ll sincerely strive to do so without it sounding like a gripe fest – though this may be a challenge. For the purpose of perspective, I should mention that my experience with the board spans a mere seven years. I have, however, worked in the landscape industry for the past 25 years in a number of different disciplines. The list below covers common issues we deal with. It’s a long list to be sure, and I don’t anticipate the adoption of all, or frankly any, of the proposed solutions should they make it to the ears of those with the powers to affect change. However, we’ve got to talk about these issues. Our passion dictates that we do.



Reciprocal Agreements

The need for reciprocal agreements seems like a “no brainer” to me, however, I’ll admit up front that I have limited experience with them. Here’s how I see it. The school board has a resource, athletic fields. Municipalities have a somewhat fluctuating need for these fields and the school board has a certain

obligation to share these resources. Municipalities seem to have, by observation, much larger budgets (as evidenced by the amount of manpower, equipment and materials available). I also assume that athletic programs operated on school board properties would generate revenues for the cities. We, at the board, do what we can within our budgets to maintain safe, playable surfaces but are falling short, way short in my humble opinion. But if we supply the fields and help with the maintenance, and the municipality also contributes to maintenance while generating revenues to offset their increased costs, and the results are safer, better quality turf for both, I’d call that mutually beneficial. I’d also call it a joint effort with shared and complimentary resources to achieve a common goal, thus a “no brainer.”

THE ISSUES...

- Reciprocal agreements. Is there a mutual need?
- Low bid policy. Is it what the taxpayer really wants?
- Budgets. Is there any flexibility?
- User cooperation. Aren’t we in this together?
- The value of professionals. If you’re going to pay, pay for passion and education as staying current pays dividends.
- Water conservation. Is legislation next?
- Contracting out. Is it cheaper?
- The Cosmetic Pesticides Ban. How do we best implement?



But “carry-over” rules would need to be changed or more aptly manipulated for long-term advantage. Perhaps we could take a percentage of dollars designated for low use turf areas and combine them with dollars allocated for high use athletic turf. This would make it just that much more safer and playable, concentrating dollars for effect or prioritizing for more effective use of budgets. We all know budgets need parameters, but creativity within budgets may produce surprising results.

User-Manager Relationship

Another challenge we face as turf managers is our relationship with the users of our facilities. You would think this would be a match made in heaven. We want to provide safe, quality turfgrass and they want to play on safe, quality turfgrass. Is there an echo in here? But, unfortunately that’s where the similarities end. The keys here are respect and cooperation. If the school administration and athletic departments as well as municipal groups respected us as turf management professionals they wouldn’t, as requested, use fields before the spring minimum deadline, use the fields when wet or raining, and reduce wear by using end zones and auxiliary fields for practice purposes and physical education classes. The message we try to convey is basic: limited maintenance funds are no match for unnecessary misuse. It just doesn’t work. It’s perplexing to me. We have the same ultimate goal, but I believe different attitudes.

Professionalism & Professionals

School boards could benefit from more of each of these. Turfgrass management is not a fledgling industry and school boards should be actively recruiting educated and experienced individuals. Turf professionals dedicate time to education and work hard in their trade to gain experience. This invariably leads to people who are passionate about their work. When you work with like-minded individuals, problem solving seems easier, there is more collaboration and ideas flow freely. It bears repeating; if you have to pay, pay for passion.

Time for a brief testimonial. Here are just a few lines to sing the praises of continuing education. My career started with a three-year landscape technology

The Lowest Bid Wins (Or Does It?)

Does the typical low bid policy, whether adopted by or imposed upon the board by government, have to be so structured and inflexible? Does the taxpayer always want the lowest price possible or would they prefer good value for their dollar? And who are these low bidders? Sometimes they’re large companies or franchises doing large volumes to cover large overheads. Sometimes they’re smaller companies trying to make their mark. Some companies in both categories are desperate for work, work they need to keep employees and suppliers on board. They are not concerned initially with profit, until they hit the job site. The results typically are substandard or unspecified materials and substandard practices that result in grading, drainage, seeding and compaction issues. Further, maintenance obligations and warranty issues are

neglected. A lack of supervision and required inspections by the board only serve as contributing factors to these results. We have had the lowest bidder provide quality workmanship and products on many occasions, so we know it’s achievable. We just need some flexibility within the policy to achieve these results more frequently and realize value for taxpayer dollars.

Budget Flexibility

When we hear the word budget, we often think set in stone, cast, or poured in place. We do this, I believe, to our detriment. Budgets should have inherent flexibility. For example, combining this year’s budget with next year’s to enable us to acquire an irrigation system that provides optimum, efficient coverage with better materials that increase the life span of both field and system makes sense to me.

course, a pretty solid industry beginning. I have taken courses and attended seminars throughout my career and since landing at the school board, have obtained my Certified Irrigation Technician designation and completed the Turf Managers' Short Course. I have other courses in mind as well. I find the more I learn, the more I want to learn. All this upgrading has proved invaluable. I deal with contractors, architects, municipal officials, partners and other professionals with confidence. The courses and professional development have an almost direct affect on my ability to do my job better. Sign me up for more!

Water Conservation

I need to talk about the challenges of water use as they relate to our irrigation systems. We have 16 high schools in our board with at least one and often two systems at each. All of this was achieved in a relatively short time period, but I wish

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it hadn't been. Systems were installed so quickly we rarely had time to evaluate their effectiveness and subsequently determine if changes, upgrades or downgrades should be made. We now have many systems installed without consideration for design and design patterns, available water, static pressure requirements, head spacing and selection, drainage, vandalism issues and

the list goes on. Due in part to the aforementioned low bid policy and perhaps specifications lacking, the results are inadequate pressure, poor head installation, spacing and selection. All these result in a grossly inefficient application of water, the exact opposite of what irrigation systems are supposed to achieve. I've heard it said that some irrigation is better than none at all. But, in this era of water conservation, when efficient use of this resource may very well be legislated upon us in the near future, don't we need the most efficient and effective application possible? To this end, we need to start with a quality system, one that is well installed, and make the time to monitor and maintain.

Sub-Contracting

Another contentious issue of late is that of contracting out. The initial motivation seems to be to save money. Can I put an operator on a mower for less than the average

maintenance contractor? I personally don't know and am not in a position to find out. However, I am a proponent of efficiencies and as a former contractor, I know I had to use my equipment almost year round to fund the next new piece. Perhaps it's more related to priorities. We could focus our resources on what we do best, most efficiently and more cost effectively, and let others do the same. Work contracted out can't be forgotten however. Contractors have to be managed. They're not all professionals like you and me. Some are desperate for work, they take on too much and quality suffers. A good rule of thumb may be to go with your strengths and evaluate often.

Cosmetic Pesticides Ban

We haven't used pesticides at our school board for over ten years, and this strategy was self-imposed. Naturally, we utilize more cultural practices, but the effects are minimal. I am certainly not a proponent of indiscriminate pesticide use. However, I believe the restricted use on specific, high

use areas by professionals would result in safer, more playable turf where it is needed most. It's concentrating effort and resources for areas of concentrated use. It's a fair and logical compromise.

The Last Word

In my attempt to relate the challenges associated with sports turf management in a school board setting, it is my sincere hope that I didn't come across as too critical. The challenges are unique and I readily admit, somewhat new to me. I offered solutions based on experience that some might deem inadequate. But, I can assure you that my common sense is intact and I use it frequently to keep it sharp! I believe reciprocal agreements are necessary, but not imperative. A rigid low bid policy is detrimental to quality and budgets without flexibility are limiting. User groups need to be more respectful and cooperative and trust the judgement of the turf professional. And speaking of professionals, isn't it time we gave these dedicated individuals the opportunity to ply their trade, yes I said trade, in private as well as public organizations.

Finally, I can't stress enough the benefits of educational opportunities for staying current in the turfgrass industry. Knowledge breeds confidence and confident people take chances. They experiment and break through barriers. In this eco-friendly era, the double challenge of efficient water use and pesticide restrictions put the turfgrass industry on its heels, but only briefly. The response was swift, with new irrigation technologies and techniques and groundbreaking research in pesticide alternatives.

It's a great time to be a turfgrass manager and I'm proud to count myself among the many. The dedication I witnessed in my fellow students at the 2011 Turf Managers' Short Course bodes well for the industry. As for the challenges I face at the school board, I feel prepared.

QUOTABLE QUOTE

High school sports: where lessons of life are still being learned, and where athletes still compete for the love of the game and their teammates. ~ Michael Powers