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Piedmont's Havens field to get environmentally friendly organic turf

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The school board has chosen cork and coconut hulls for Havens Elementary School's play field, to the relief of many Havens' parents.

District officials had been considering a crumb rubber surface for the field, but after receiving a petition with 115 signatures from parents opposing installing rubber, they developed a list of alternative surfaces, including cork and coconut, plastic, sand and grass.

Though there were few mentions of toxicity or health issues in any of the alternatives, seven of the 15 attendees at Tuesday's special board meeting spoke against choosing rubber.

The field is intended for the school's kindergartners through fifth-graders and as a community resource. Its plans include two small synthetic turf soccer fields for children's use.

Beach school parent Margaret Ovenden said her research concluded that "No one disputes there are chemicals in the rubber product, which is made from old tires, can cause cancer and other problems.

"The studies that have been done aren't sufficient to make a blanket statement that it poses no risk," she

said. "We have two better alternatives; grass and cork."

The district's report stated that live grass was the heavy hitter with annual maintenance costs about eight times more than any of the synthetic surfaces, which all cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 per year to keep up. The same was true for durability, with all of the synthetics listed as unlimited compared with the seasonal use of grass.

Heather Clem said she and her husband are worried about the heat produced in rubber on warm days.

"Our son was at summer camp and one day he was at one of the fields in town with the crumb rubber," she said. "He got a fever and had a mild heat stroke. Without a doubt the heat emitted from that field. My husband is a coach and he said it's uncomfortable and hot on the fields. The best thing would be grass, but if not that, at least something organic."

Parent Shannon Bloemker, whose family recently moved here from Boston, recommended a cork and coconut surface like the one installed at the school her children attended in Boston.

"Crumb rubber can't even be put into landfill after eight years," she said. (Eight years is the estimated durability span of the product for playing fields.)

Morissa Sherman said her daughter Miranda is asthmatic and sensitive to chemicals and feared that a rubber surface would exacerbate her symptoms.

The board's vote was unanimous to ask Geo Turf USA for a bid for a cork and coconut hull installation. The \$225,000 ballpark estimate for the installation would cost about \$25,000 more than the crumb rubber field would have cost. Geo Turf USA has installed more turf in Europe than in the United States.

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Trustee Rick Raushenbush said while he isn't ready to act in alarm and pull out the existing two rubber fields in town, he does believe that an organic product is better.

"There isn't all that much contrary data about crumb rubber to date," he said, "but the organic material isn't as hot as rubber, and grass costs too much."

Board member Martha Jones said the cork and coconut turf would be better than grass.

"I watched the Beach play field for years and it was a mud hole almost immediately after it was installed," she said.

Trustee Ray Tolles said: "The heat issues with rubber are real. In an ideal world, we'd have a beautifully maintained grass field. But a lot of kids want to play sports and I don't think grass is going to work for us on a daily basis. The maintenance costs would have an ongoing impact on the school district's budget. I prefer organic fill."

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