



New turf to be installed at Erie Veterans Stadium

By Ed Palattella

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Stadium Commission to pay for new playing surface as part of Erie School District's massive renovation plan. Stadium work to occur over the summer.

The Erie School District is set to begin its \$80.8 million building renovation project, which will focus mainly on such utilitarian needs as new roofs, repaved parking lots and updated heating and cooling systems.

But one improvement will be more visible than most.

Veterans Memorial Stadium will get new artificial turf, replacing the playing surface that has carpeted the field of the Erie School District landmark at 26th and State streets since 2006.

"The turf there is 12 years old and has most of its useful life gone," the school district's director of facilities and maintenance, Eric Seibert, told the School Board at its monthly meeting a week ago.

The 10,000-seat stadium, which was built in 1924 and hosts mainly football and soccer games, will also undergo fixes to its concrete steps and field-level wall, especially at its southern end. The stadium will get a new roof and other updates to its press box and upgrades to the restrooms.

The school district will launch its overall three-year renovation project in the spring, and is preparing to solicit bids for the project. The work on the stadium, including the turf installations, is scheduled to be one of the first undertakings.

"The goal is to get that done for the start of the school year, so we can be done for fall sports," Erie schools Superintendent Brian Polito said on Tuesday.

The district is paying for most of its renovations using two sources of funding: about \$30 million in cash, which the district can afford due to its receipt of \$14 million in additional annual state aid, and a yet-to-be-issued bond of about \$50 million.

The stadium improvements will cost an estimated \$1.3 million, according to the district, but Polito said the district will mostly pay for the turf by tapping into a funding source designated for such work: the accounts of the Veterans Memorial Stadium Commission, which now amount to about \$385,000, Polito said. He said the turf is estimated to cost \$410,000.

The revenue for the Stadium Commission funds comes mainly from concession sales and rental income. The Stadium Commission, made up of School Board appointees, has been building up its accounts for years to buy new turf, said the commission's chairman, Leroy Goodwin.

"We have the money set aside," said Goodwin, an Erie resident and Army veteran of the Vietnam War who is also one of the two military veterans on the commission. Veterans Stadium was dedicated to honor World War I veterans.

The Stadium Commission used its accrued funds to pay for the turf that was installed in 2006. That turf, which cost \$380,000, replaced artificial turf then went in in 1995.

The district paid nothing for the 1995 turf in exchange for an arrangement in which it agreed to give advertising revenue, from ads on the field, to an out-of-state marketing firm. The deal ended with the district suing in federal court over claims of faulty installation of the turf.

Before the 1995 artificial turf, the field at Veterans Stadium had been grass.

The other main athletic field in the Erie School District is Erie High's Biletnikoff Field, named after Erie native and NFL Hall of Fame wide receiver Fred Biletnikoff. The field, behind Erie High, is grass and in need of improvement.

Polito told the School Board that the district wants its foundation, the Partnership for Erie's Public Schools, to raise enough in donations to install artificial turf and an all-weather running track at Biletnikoff Field. Due to its design, Veterans Stadium lacks enough room for a running track.

“Right now, it’s our hope that is something that we could do through the majority of fundraising,” Polito said.

Ed Palattella can be reached at 870-1813 or by email. Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/ETNpalattella.