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TOPICAL FEATURED

Superintendent committed to improving district through sports complex project

By Maria Basileo
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The plans for Shenango's outdoor artificial turf field

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Shenango Area School District Superintendent Michael Schreck is clearing the air about the estimated \$4.9 million sports complex project that has been creating a stir around the township since June.

“We’re committed to doing the project,” he said.

Schreck presented the first phase of the two-part plan during a school board meeting in August after spending some time researching prices and companies. The first phase includes an indoor sports building and an outdoor athletic field.

The research included meeting with FieldTurf, a Florida-based company that installs artificial turf on sports fields.

A month later, on Sept. 16, the school board awarded the bid for the outdoor artificial turf field to the company for a little more than \$1.2 million.

Schreck said that he did not know FieldTurf had been named as the defendant in lawsuits filed by school districts around the country, including two in Lawrence County.

New Castle and Neshannock school districts joined a class action lawsuit against the company for what they claimed were defective fields about three years ago. Neshannock spent \$700,000 to install its football field in 2008, and New Castle spent \$800,000 in 2009.

During the research phase, Schreck said Shenango's athletic director spoke with Neshannock's athletic director about their district's experience with the company and product. He said the response was positive, but that the topic of the lawsuit against FieldTurf was not mentioned.

"I followed up with Neshannock, and I talked to their superintendent about that, and he said that (the fact there was a lawsuit) was true. However, FieldTurf came in and made it right with the football field," Schreck said. "(Neshannock) used the same company that put the baseball field in, so they were happy with the product."

During a meeting with representatives from FieldTurf, who did some measuring to get an idea of the total cost, the lawsuits also were not mentioned.

After becoming aware of the lawsuits, Schreck said he called FieldTurf, which explained a former employee frequently sends "propaganda" from media outlets such as the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Forbes Magazine of the company's past every time it is awarded a bid. The company representative assured Schreck FieldTurf no longer uses the defective products mentioned in the cases.

The root of the class action lawsuits stemmed from a product Field Turf used for their artificial grass called Duraspine. Duraspine, produced in United Arab Emirates, was a faulty product, according to the lawsuits.

“FieldTurf ended up doing a lawsuit against Duraspine for faulty products, so I think they won that case,” Schreck said. “FieldTurf then opened up a manufacturing plant (in Georgia) where they manufacture their own grass now, so they’re not purchasing it from a secondary company.”

FieldTurf, Schreck said, was a part of the “state bid list,” so the district didn’t necessarily have to receive three competitive bids. Another company, Hellas Construction of Austin, Texas, also was contacted for a meeting to present its product and services, but Schreck thought the two companies’ offers were comparable.

“We ultimately liked the product (from FieldTurf) better,” Schreck said.

The superintendent said the district has not signed a contract with Field Turf due to ongoing drainage testing on the field, which is a necessary step in the process.

“We sent over a purchase order. We’re on the books, but I don’t think there is a necessarily a contract until the water filtration system and all that kind of stuff is actually (done),” he said.

Some residents have questioned the board’s priorities in starting this project first when the elementary school has been in need of repairs for many years.

“Three years ago, you said this place was falling apart, which I agree,” said former Shenango school board member Bob Davis during the October board meeting. “Where are you in the planning for the new school?”

To “lessen the blow,” Schreck said, the district thought a less expensive project would be more acceptable to residents by avoiding the potentially \$30 million bill for the demolition of the current elementary school and the construction of another.

“So this is a way (first phase) to cheapen the elementary school because you won’t need to add the gym,” Schreck said. “The steel structure (indoor athletics building) is less expensive than a brick and mortar gym would cost.”

The new elementary school project, which is phase two, could begin in the next 8 to 10 years.

In 2015, a referendum vote was held to determine whether voters wanted to raise the district's debt to \$44.5 million to fund the construction of a new elementary school connected to the high school via a gymnasium.

A question needed to appear on the ballot due to the district needing to raise property taxes above the Department of Education index. Property taxes would have been raised to 4.16 mills over a four-year period.

"The voters overwhelmingly voted it down," Schreck said.

Of the 2,676 residents who voted, 69 percent voted no, while 31 percent voted yes.

The "ultimate goal," Schreck said, is to entice more people to move into Shenango and the district.

"We need to do something," he said. "We need to keep improving our facilities and our product."

The district sent out a survey early the following year for voters to answer questions as to what project they would prefer instead, if any.

Of the 550 people who replied to the survey, 339 were no-voters, 167 were yes-voters and 44 did not participate in the referendum.

Of the yes-voters, 108 wanted a new elementary and high school gym, but 180 no-voters and 19 non-voters wouldn't support any construction project.

In terms of moving forward, 112 yes-voters wanted a similar project, while 196 no-voters and 20 non-voters wanted the district to attempt to merge districts.

The issues sparking the interest in building the complex center around scheduling conflicts with the current field, late sport practices, limited space for other organizations, subpar practice field conditions and drainage issues on the main football field, Schreck said.

The outdoor field will be made completely out of artificial turf, and construction will potentially begin after the district's track season commences in May. It's projected to be completed by next fall.

The indoor athletics building is still in the architectural design phase, but Schreck predicts bids will go out in the near future and construction will begin around May as well.

The indoor facility will feature a batting cage, weight room, track, volleyball/basketball court and football/soccer turf field. It also will house spring/winter sports, be accessible for clubs and have an indoor walking facility for the public, who currently use the school’s hallways during inclement weather.

Some of the cons outlined in Schreck’s presentation include displacing the band and challenges with full football and marching band rehearsal.

“It will be lucrative in the sense that it will help ease the scheduling issues and facility shortfalls we currently have in the district,” Schreck said.

Conversation

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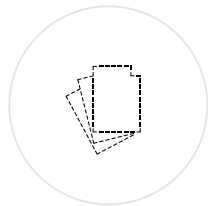


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