

Build the ground work properly when choosing your field surface

IN THE WORLD OF RECREATION and sport design and facility management, few topics can be as hotly debated and contested as the decision of what type of playing surface to provide the user groups. The primary question commonly revolves around whether the newly renovated or constructed field will remain natural grass or be synthetic turf. This decision is clearly one that will be set in place likely for several years, and in the case of synthetic turf, likely for a decade or more due to the difficulty in reverting back to natural grass due to funding limitations most owners have.

When discussion initially begins in scoping out a project for improving the existing field or



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building a new facility, there are several factors that need to be weighed and discussed at all levels. These factors will typically include:

- Available capital (i.e. initial construction/project) funding
- Foreseeable anticipated annual M&O funding for field/facility upkeep
- Required hours of field use for various end users
- Expectations of a successful sports field
- Alignment of design field type with all parties, including:
 - ▶ Governing Board/Owner's final decision makers
 - ▶ Owner's Project Team
 - ▶ Maintenance Team
 - ▶ Design Team
 - ▶ User Groups
 - ▶ Community at-large/Constituents
- An educated understanding of project issues that may arise during the surface selection process before beginning the actual process

While all of the above factors are key influences in making a successful decision, the last two typically are ones where missteps can have profound effects. This is where advanced pre-planning is essential, and that the owner undertake the necessary time to understand where these issues may lay, and how to effectively address in the decision making process.

The important tools needed by every owner and design professional are the knowledge and ability to facilitate project discussions and, ultimately, build consensus among stakeholders. Creating a forum where a clear message about the project can be disseminated to those outside the decision-making circle, while, at the same time, providing an opportunity for stakeholder comments, desires, and concerns be heard, is a time-honored method used by design professionals to bring all involved parties together. However, if steps haven't been taken to align the desires of all of the interested parties in the design field types and if the issues that can arise during the selection process are not clearly understood, the facilitation process may face a significantly reduced chance for success. This is especially true when the community-at-large is included in the facilitation process.

INCLUDE TURF MANAGERS IN DECISIONS

To not have an advance understanding of issues and concerns of any one group, as well as not have prepared and developed plans to address these issues and concerns, can lead to the quick erosion of project support. It does not take much to undermine months of work and hundreds of hours spent on the evolution of the project if key research and consensus building among all parties is not proactively developed.

One example of where effective facilitation was used was with a city developing new fields in conjunction with a local school district. The public process brought in all the key stakeholders and there was consensus that the fields as planned would serve the needs of the local youth groups scheduled to use these fields.

However, the USGA sand-based fields that were planned (and subsequently constructed), while high-end fields, were not necessarily understood by the maintenance staff, nor was the required water use. While these items should be identified before facilitation processes, the inclusion of the maintenance staff (who were not present at initial project scoping sessions) would have likely shaped what was presented and discussed with the community and user groups.

An example how facilitation can be detrimental when the discussed pre-planning processes and alignment among the stakeholders are not completed occurred with a public agency that wanted to replace several natural grass fields with synthetic turf. The owner's project manager did not fully understand that the agency's governing board was not fully behind the project's objective to use synthetic turf to reduce maintenance costs and increase field use. In addition, the local community surrounding the fields was largely opposed to the proposed project, due to the environmental and health concerns, as well as the identified increased use.

While there was likely nothing that may have fully alleviated these concerns from a small group of neighbors, knowing in advance what the concerns were would have allowed the design professionals time before the facilitation meetings to educate

the client on the benefits and issues with synthetic turf, whether real or perceived. In addition, the project manager would have been well-suited to ask superiors whether there was strong support for the project as proposed from all levels, including the decision-makers and governing board. This understanding of the concerns, and where the support was—and most importantly, was not—would have made the facilitation process more effective.

While facilitation can bring up issues, it also can be instrumental in developing clear support and consensus for a project. Work with a public agency recently was completed replacing two existing natural grass fields with synthetic turf. Before the project was begun, the city's project manager in charge of delivering the project completed extensive research on issues other nearby public agencies encountered when reconstructing natural grass fields with synthetic turf and how they were/were not addressed. He also made sure that his superiors and the city council fully supported the project before com-

mencing the work. By the time that the pre-design effort had begun, much of the research had been completed about what the key issues would be with the improvements. As it turned out, the community was fine with the synthetic turf fields, provided field lighting was not installed. But this would not have been known without preliminary research and discussions.

Effective facilitation for any project revolves around providing information for discussion and receiving clear comments and full discussion. Hopefully, there is common ground in support for the project from the community and user groups. In order to maximize the opportunity to achieve this goal, the pre-planning research and reinforcement that there is solidarity in the project's support is a key factor in its successful use of facilitation as a means to obtain project support. ■

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