



Creating & managing expectations—the key to field use and maintenance planning

Editor's note: This article is based on a presentation at January's STMA Conference by Rebecca Auchter, manager of grounds maintenance, Cranberry Township, PA entitled "Athletic Field Use and Maintenance Planning." Thanks to Ms. Auchter for allowing us to use this material; more information can be found at the links listed below from www.cranberrytownship.org.

As many parks and recreation and K-12 school district turf managers know, the agendas of field users and administrators are often contrary to what is best for their fields. Rebecca Auchter, manager of grounds maintenance for Cranberry Township, PA told her audience at the Sports Turf Managers Association Conference in January that to combat this, they needed to create and manage others' expectations. Auchter said the path to

creating and managing expectations was to establish good relationships with key "influencers" such as administrators and spend time communicating with and training them, with a goal that eventually you will spend less time doing that and more time on agronomic practices. She reminded the audience that establishing rela-

tionships means "being nice" and "making friends."

"You have to get the 'owners' of the fields to buy in to what you want to do to protect your fields," she said. "The better your documentation and the more thorough your policies are, the faster you can get back to work."

Auchter said turf managers

need to teach, train, communicate, document and explain, not only to supervisors and other administrators but also to field users. She has put together three tools she uses to accomplish this: a Parks Maintenance Plan; an Athletic Field Use Policy; and an Athletic Field Maintenance Manual. "You can use these tools to answer a lot of questions so again, you can get back to work."

PARKS MAINTENANCE PLAN

"The Parks Maintenance Plan is general and comprehensive—what we have, where it is, what we do with it, and how to assess it," said Auchter. The plan is broken out into categories of maintenance (turfgrass, skins, trees/landscape, trails, etc.) and

"It's all about expectations!"

-Rebecca Auchter, Cranberry Twp. manager of grounds

then detailed levels of maintenance for each category (though not to the level of products/rates). For example, a 75-acre park is divided into priority zones; zone 1 areas are “mow and go”; zone 2 areas are surrounds and common areas; zone 3 areas are non-irrigated fields that do get chemical treatments; and zone 4 areas are irrigated fields that have full programs of fertility and preventive fungicide.

This maintenance plan includes Maintenance Inspection Checklists labeled Athletic Fields: Game and Practice Field Playing Surfaces; Athletic Field Envelope; Playgrounds; Hard Surface Courts and Sand Volleyball; Shelters; Restroom and Concession Buildings; and Park Common Areas. Auchter said these checklists are used as assessment tools but also are valuable documentation in mitigating risk, as well as help her provide answers in meetings.

Auchter said she also uses Daily Task Sheets that include 17 categories to document how many hours are spent doing work in those categories every day. “This shows supervisors what we do and how much we do it,” she said.

“I have used these daily task sheets to show that consistently 35-40 percent of my time is spent NOT working on green-related tasks,” she said. “It is good to be able to show this since I am being judged on those green tasks.”

ATHLETIC FIELD MAINTENANCE MANUAL

Auchter describes the Athletic Field Maintenance Manual as a “training manual for our partner associations”—aka VOLUNTEERS. “Again, this manual creates and manages expectations,” she said. “This manual spells out how the Township expects users to treat and maintain our fields.” [See “Athletic Field Maintenance Manual” sidebar for details.]

ATHLETIC FIELD USE POLICY

This document was adopted by the Cranberry Township Board of Supervisors; Auchter described its content as “middle of the road-specific but not overly penal.” The township holds bi-annual meetings where users and township personnel get together to assess capital needs and introduce new policies, and perhaps most importantly, discuss field reservations and scheduling. “Get involved in scheduling up front,” she said, “because it will be to your great benefit. Spell out to users the most easily avoidable wear that any field gets; for example, no team needs to practice in soccer goal mouths.”

Another important aspect of the meetings is sharing information on how and when fields will be closed. Auchter manages this website for the township and said she posts field closings by 11 am weekdays, and by 9 pm the night before on weekends.

She said there are provisions in the policy manual for associations to overrule the closing if the weather improves, but that the onus on closing fields which deteriorate after an “open” posting falls on the associations as well. Moisture meters are available for the users to use when necessary to remain objective, Auchter said. As part of a Progressive Action Plan, the township will stop maintaining fields used by association groups that won’t work with township officials on these policies.

Auchter said to keep in mind that policies established should include rest and renovation periods, how it is determined whether fields are open or closed, and all scheduled closures, as well as time built in for general agronomic practices. [See “Athletic Field Use Policy” sidebar for details.] ■

