



Jackie Lieberman
& Matt Kadosh



TAPintoWestfield
Your Neighborhood News Online

LOGIN

SUBMIT CONTENT

NEWSLETTER SIGNUP

Westfield > Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor

Letter: Councilman Supports Improved Fields in Westfield, But Not Edison Fields Plan

Westfield should objectively explore other options before voting on this flawed plan, he writes.



Opinion

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

TAPinto Westfield File Photo

By DAVID CONTRACT, WARD 3 COUNCILMAN
Published October 26, 2022 at 4:00 PM

I'd like to share why I'm opposed to the Edison Fields Plan, a perspective I've formed over the past 16 months listening to Ward 3 residents, reading countless studies/reports, and talking to industry experts.

I fully support the need for more field capacity in Westfield – but the best way to achieve this goal is by first exploring all options, then putting together comprehensive and objective financial analysis on the most promising options before voting on a specific plan. I've been advocating for this approach since this

project was first announced, and I continue to believe this is the best way to ensure Westfield makes the right decision on addressing this important issue.

There are many options that should be analyzed including additional field locations and field surfaces before any vote on the Edison Plan. You may not realize this, but the Edison Fields **do not** offer the town 100% incremental capacity. In fact, these fields are used every day after school by BOE sports teams and the marching band. The primary source of incremental capacity is at night via lights.

There are other locations in town like the seven acres in Tamaques Park outside the oval along Lamberts Mill Road as well as other school locations that could be developed or upgraded into high quality playing fields that offer 100% incremental capacity. These options should be explored first before voting on the Edison Plan.

Additionally, the [recent report](#) by CME (the engineering firm hired by the town to evaluate the Edison plan) is based on many assumptions that I find to be flawed, biased and incomplete, and which lead to an incorrect conclusion that synthetic turf fields are less expensive on a cost per incremental playable hour than natural grass fields. Here are several examples of these unreasonable assumptions:

- **Synthetic turf replacement and disposable costs.** CME assumed a \$6/sq. ft. cost for synthetic turf replacement and disposal, which is unreasonably low. Industry experts in 2014 said synthetic turf replacement and disposal costs average \$7.00/sq. ft. Plus, the BOE paid around \$8.00/sq. ft for the Kehler Field replacement/disposal in 2019 and a 2021 price list from Shaw's Sports Turf (one of the leading synthetic turf manufacturers in the US) listed \$11.00/sq. ft for replacement and disposal. When pressed on this by me, CME shared three invoices to support its assumption but two of them didn't include disposal costs. Lastly, and perhaps most egregiously, CME's assumptions for turf replacement and disposal costs along with all other cost assumptions don't include any projected cost increases over the next 30 years – another unreasonable assumption.
- **Replacement timeframe for synthetic turf fields.** CME assumed a 12-year replacement timeline for synthetic turf fields even though most industry experts assume 7-10 years in their analysis and manufacturer warranties are typically for only eight years. This assumption isn't reasonable.
- **Synthetic Turf Maintenance Costs.** CME's analysis doesn't include many cost items that credible industry experts say are required to maintain Synthetic Turf fields annually including irrigation, infill replacement, disinfecting, minor wear & tear repair and labor. They included similar costs for natural grass fields but not turf – also unreasonable.
- **Natural grass playable hours.** CME used sources that are a decade old to justify that "good" natural grass fields can deliver 800 playable hours a year. There are many more recent examples that show properly constructed and maintained natural grass fields can deliver up to 1,800 playable hours per

year. Most experts assume natural grass fields can deliver 1,000-1,200 playable hours in their analysis. CME's assumption is unreasonable.

- **Incremental Synthetic Turf playable hours.** CME assumed 2,178 total playable hours per field every year. But the Recreation Commission stated in a Jan. 2022 report that the maximum number of hours it schedules annually per field is 1,760. Even the town's lit Sid Fey Houlihan synthetic turf fields are only used 1,300-1,400 hours per year. CME's analysis doesn't exclude the hours that the BOE/school uses these fields after school nor excludes the hours that these new fields won't be used to avoid exacerbating traffic, parking and congestion issues in the neighborhood when there are events at Kehler or Edison. CME's assumptions aren't reasonable.
- **Natural grass costs for installation and replacement costs.** CME's costing was based on the second most expensive type of natural grass fields (called "Sand Cap & Drainage") even though there are other options that should have been analyzed like Built-Up Sand Capped Fields with Drainage that deliver similar playing capacity at 1/3 of the cost. Additionally, CME's analysis assumed a 100% replacement of the natural grass fields every five years, which natural grass experts say isn't necessary when fields are built and maintained properly. CME's assumptions are unreasonable.
- **Interest cost associated with more expensive synthetic turf fields.** CME's financial analysis excludes the additional borrowing costs associated with the more expensive synthetic turf field proposal. This projected interest cost totals to \$1.3mm assuming a 3% interest rate for 10-year bonds using their published cost assumptions. This isn't reasonable.
- **CME ignored that the Edison Fields Plan requires approximately 75,000 sq. ft of unnecessary synthetic turf costing \$2.0mm.** The proposed Edison Fields plan requires turfing the entire JV baseball field in order to add an additional rectangular turf field in part of the baseball field's outfield. The reason – you can't have a part synthetic turf, part natural grass baseball field. This adds \$2.0mm of additional cost based on the proposed \$27.20 cost/sq. ft for synthetic turf fields in this proposal.

For all of these reasons, CME's analysis is biased and incomplete and draws an incorrect conclusion that synthetic turf fields are less expensive than natural grass fields per playable hour. When you apply assumptions that industry experts consider more reasonable including those outlined above, synthetic turf fields with lights cost more than natural grass fields with lights on a per playable hour basis.

And when you perform additional financial analysis using even more realistic assumptions, synthetic turf costs 33% more per incremental playable hour than natural grass fields without lights (note: this analysis assumes the synthetic turf fields are available for 1,505 incremental hours/year after subtracting 673 hours of school/BOE use from the inflated 2,178 hours/field/year used by CME, assumes the more expensive Built-Up Sand Capped With Drainage natural grass natural field but excludes lights since they aren't necessary given the lower natural grass field playing time).

Besides not being a smart investment, this Edison Fields Plan has other major issues that CME's report doesn't address including:

- **Part of the Edison fields lie in the 500-year FEMA flood hazard zone.** If these fields flood, the town could face expensive repairs like those that occurred after Tropical Storm Ida when synthetic turf fields flooded in Westfield and Ridgewood causing damages up to \$150,000. Even worse, the town could face costly environmental remediation since these fields are adjacent to the Robinson's Branch creek, which is part of the Rahway River Watershed.
- **The plan exacerbates existing traffic, congestion, parking, noise and safety issues** with the addition of fields with lights in a crowded residential neighborhood.

For all of these reasons, the Edison Fields plan isn't the right plan for Westfield and should be voted down by the Council and the BOE.

But since the town needs fields, I strongly recommend that the BOE and Town Council instead appoint a cross-functional working group made up of major stakeholders to build a holistic plan to address the town's fields capacity deficit and the poor shape of town and school grass fields. This new plan should look at locations where the town can maximize incremental field capacity and include hiring a Sports Turf Manager/team to properly upgrade and maintain all grass fields in town. I believe this will be a much more fiscally responsible way to address the town's field capacity issue.

Here's a little food for thought along these lines: If the town spent the money being proposed for synthetic turf fields with lights at Edison (\$8.3mm) and instead, spent it on properly constructed and maintained natural grass fields, the town could develop nearly 1.2mm square feet of high quality natural grass fields (assuming CME's inflated \$7.00 per square foot assumption). This would likely satisfy all of the town's fields capacity deficit.

If you agree with my perspective, please let members of the Council and Board of Education hear from you before this proposal is voted on. And of course, please feel free to reach out to me to discuss further. Thanks.

Sincerely,

David Contract, Ward 3 Councilman

The opinions expressed herein are the writer's alone, and do not reflect the opinions of [TAPinto.net](#) or anyone who works for [TAPinto.net](#). [TAPinto.net](#) is not responsible for the accuracy of any of the information supplied by the writer. Do you have an opinion on something happening in your town or about a story you read on TAPinto? Submit a letter to the editor [here](#). Letters could be edited for length, clarity or spelling. Publication is at the sole discretion of TAPinto and must be factually accurate and not defamatory. You must also include your name and phone number, for verification purposes. Anonymous letters will not be published. If TAPinto deems your letter defamatory or inaccurate, the writer may be given the opportunity to revise their letter or provide documentation for their claims. Due to the volume of submissions we receive, TAPinto cannot personally guarantee a response for each submission. If your letter is published, you will receive a response.

[Read More TAPinto Westfield News](#)