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Turf deal signed, Newton South field may not be complete for spring track season

Posted October 22, 2009 09:00 AM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

Opponents of synthetic turf and city officials signed a settlement Tuesday afternoon which will allow construction of a new track and field, delayed for five months, to resume soon at Newton South High School. However, it remains unclear whether the field will be ready for the start of the spring track season.

The petitioners, led by activist Guive Mirfendereski, halted completion of a synthetic turf track and field at the high school when they filed an appeal in June through the state environmental department, based on its proximity to wetlands.

Now that the city and the petitioners have reached an official agreement, the settlement's withdrawal of appeal will go before the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) for the final approval before construction can resume.

City spokesman Jeremy Solomon said work on the fields may be able to start back up before the ground freezes and winter moves in, and city officials hope construction will be complete in time for the spring track season.

However, Solomon said, "it is likely that a portion of the spring track season will not take place at Newton South."

"The timeframe is very difficult to predict," he added.

The agreement outlines a series of conditions the city must follow to ensure the field's synthetic surface does not become a hazard to the wetlands — including regularly conducting tests and inspections, removing any accumulation of rubber granules, and not using pest- or weed-killing chemicals within 100 feet of the wetland buffer zone.

"I think it's a win-win for everyone," Mirfendereski said Tuesday moments after signing the agreement. "Especially for the environment."

In a press release sent Wednesday, Mayor David Cohen said, "I am pleased to reach this Settlement Agreement and am hopeful that the DEP can sign off expeditiously in order to salvage the Spring track season. This agreement reaffirms the city's position that the work we are doing at Newton South is not harmful to the health, safety or wellbeing of its users or the environment."

There are two fields at the high school, one of which is in full use now. The other field, which was under appeal, is currently used by the football team, but construction was not far enough along for soccer or track team members to use during the delay.

"It's not the best thing in the world for the petitioners, but it's still something," said Mirfendereski in an interview Friday when a tentative agreement had been

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reached. "We're happy."

"This little delay was regrettable for the track and soccer players, but I think it was a small price to pay for an ecologically responsible outcome," added Mirfendereski, who runs a website, www.SynTurf.org, which chronicles the potential problems with fake grass.

The Newton Conservation Commission approved the project with conditions, but Mirfendereski and several other residents appealed that decision last spring.

The city had done its own testing and said previously that it did not agree that there is any environmental hazard.

"I'm relieved that this may be coming to an end," said Ted Tye, who founded the advocacy group Newturf to bring artificial field to Newton South, in an interview on Friday when a tentative agreement had been reached. "It has been a long, painful and unnecessary chapter. It shouldn't have happened; but it did, and I'm glad it's over."

Tye said it is "questionable" whether the field will be ready for the start of the spring track season, but he hopes it will be done by the end of the spring at the latest

Lisa Kocian of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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