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MSI opposes SoccerPlex changes, others give support

■ Concern voiced over lease provision that would give preference to teams from the upcounty

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The largest recreational soccer club in Montgomery County wants assurances that more games made possible by proposed artificial turf and lighted soccer fields at the Maryland SoccerPlex will result in reduced game fees for all clubs.

The measures that would allow more games are outlined in lease amendments for the premiere soccer facility which are being considered by the County Council.

The Maryland Soccer Foundation, the nonprofit that operates the SoccerPlex, and the Department of Park and Planning started renegotiating the 40-year-lease on the 166-acres at the South Germantown Recreational Park last year.

About 20 people testified during a public hearing before the County Council's Planning Housing and Economic Development committee in Rockville on June 13.

Seven of those who testified were from Montgomery Soccer Inc., a Rockville-based club that represents 15,000 players and 10,000 families. All seven said that portions of the renegotiated lease needed serious attention, including field-allocation guidelines, playing fees and oversight.

Three representatives from other soccer clubs spoke in favor of the overall lease amendments. Two neighboring homeowners to the SoccerPlex wanted provisions in the lease to address traffic and noise. Six people representing cultural and business organizations were in support of the lease amendments and cited the positive economic impact the SoccerPlex has on Germantown.

The Planning Board recently approved the lease amendments and forwarded them to the council, which will either approve the lease or provide comments for planners to renegotiate with MSF. The council is expected to vote on the lease later this summer.

The SoccerPlex is a public-private facility that operates on land leased from the county.

The proposed lease changes increase county oversight, and affect the hours of operation, the number of games allowed and the development of the next two phases of the soccer complex, including artificial turf fields and more lighted fields. Currently, games are scheduled from about 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., but the renegotiated lease would allow games to be played from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.

"The lease amendments will provide more access, not less, to the SoccerPlex for all clubs," said MSF Executive Director Trish Heffelfinger. "For instance, MSI only scheduled 310 games at the SoccerPlex in the fall 2005 season. With the lease amendments, the number of MSI games in the fall 2006 season will increase to at least 504. Without the lease amendments, the number of games will be 397 and three other local clubs will receive no games in the fall."

The amendments also include loosening other field restrictions, such as requiring 25 percent of the fields be rested on weekends and holding only 10 tournaments a year.

Opinions ran the gamut at last week's public hearing.

"I don't think you have a document before you that's ready to go," said MSI's treasurer, Michael Kator. "MSI also would be happy with expansion of playing opportunities to the extent the fields can support it. But there's nothing in the lease that says 'Wait a minute, you're overusing the fields.' We don't know if fields can withstand that use."

Kator suggested a temporary solution: allow 3,000 games in the fall to test if the fields can be maintained at their current level.

MSI president Jeff Kauffman outlined his concerns about a lease provision that gives upcounty teams priority for Saturday games.

"The majority of teams who are historical supporters are not what is considered upcounty," Kauffman said.

MSI is also concerned that MSF's recently-formed soccer club, Soccer Association of Montgomery, will also get priority.

Club representatives said that games should be proportionately allocated based on the percentage of players each club has in relation to the total number of players in the county. The lease calls for preference to be given to upcounty teams.

"The clause for upcounty teams for Saturday play should be eliminated," said Bernie Mihm of the Gaithersburg-based Seneca Soccer Association. "We don't think that any club or group no matter what part of the county they are from should be banned from playing."

Heffelfinger said that teams from all over the county will continue to be allocated games.

"This past spring, Montgomery County teams received 95-percent of all games played at the SoccerPlex and of those, 90-percent went to founding member clubs," she said. "Those statistics will continue into the future."

Some clubs said they just want to get the whole thing over with.

"It's time to put this behind us and let the kids play soccer," said Linda Norton, president of the Bethesda Soccer Club, which is not in favor of proportional game allocation. "We want to continue to play our home games at the SoccerPlex."

The PHED committee is scheduled to hold a work session to discuss the lease amendments on Monday.